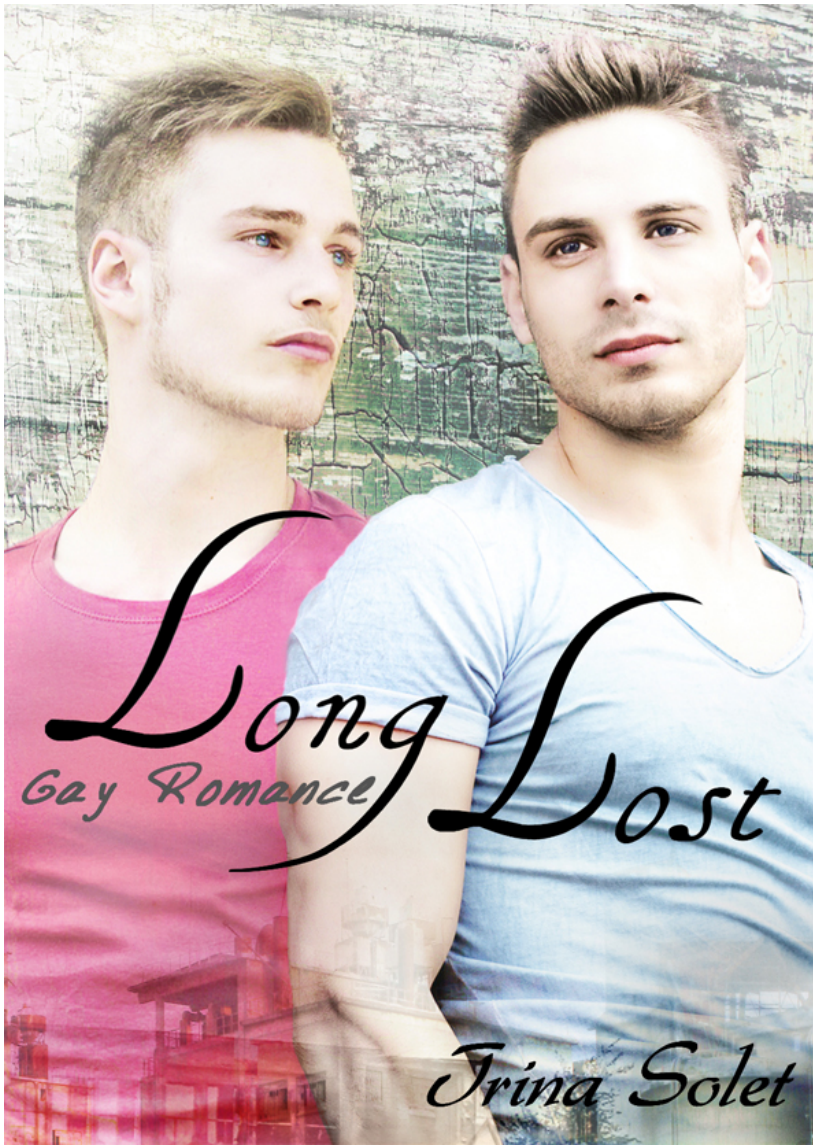
Long Lost
Gay Romance
Irina Solet

Long Lost: Gay Romance

By Trina Solet

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Long Lost

Gay Romance

Trina Solet

Chapter 1

It was nearly summer, but Finn shivered and balled up his fists in the pockets of his suit jacket. The shiver wasn't from the cool breeze that blew among the headstones. Finn was watching his father being put into the ground. It was the greatest loneliness Finn could imagine. He felt it like a cold hand wrapping around his heart. That's when Dee put her arm through his. She always knew when he needed her close. This time she was reminding him that he wasn't alone in this. Jim Monroe wasn't the nicest guy, but he was their father, and it was hard to say goodbye to him. Finn looked over at Dee. The breeze was stirring the ends of her long, dark hair, making them do a little twirling dance. As he looked at her face, Finn saw that she was staring off toward the edge of the cemetery to his left.

"Look," Dee nudged him to look over there. "Who is that?"

"Never seen him. Maybe Mom knows," Finn whispered to her.

When they tried to point him out to their mother, he was gone. The copse of trees where the guy had been standing only rustled as the wind picked up and shook the branches. The day was cool and sunny with only the barest hint of late spring. The sky was very blue above the trees that edged the cemetery. Looking for any sign of where the guy might have gone, Finn noticed another young guy loitering further on. Though he was cute, he didn't interest him right now. Finn's eyes searched for the guy Dee had spotted, but he had disappeared.

"That must have been him," Dee whispered.

"We don't know that," Finn told her. He was always the naysayer, and he wasn't about to abandon that role just because his heart was beating a little faster and his eyes were still combing the edge of the cemetery for their mystery man.

"You saw him. He looked just like the old pictures of Dad when he was young," Dee said, pressing herself closer against him. "Who else could he be?"

"Any random guy," Finn said, stubbornly playing the skeptic.

She scoffed at that.

Dee was right. The guy, who was nowhere to be seen now, had

resembled their father in his younger days. The very handsome face was just like Dad's in those old pictures. This guy had brown hair cut very short except on top where it was longer and spiked. He was fairly tall. His jean jacket was buttoned up against the chill in the air, but Finn was sure he had a good body under there. From so far away, Finn couldn't see the color of his eyes, but they might have been dark blue like their father's.

Turning away from his futile search, Finn looked at the coffin as it was about to be lowered. He got ready to say goodbye to his dad and to all the questions he had for him about his other family and especially his other son.

*

Blake stayed well back from the crowd at his father's graveside. He wasn't sure if there was anyone there who might recognize him, but he wasn't taking any chances. From where he stood on the edge of the cemetery, he couldn't see much or hear anything. He had only gotten a glimpse of the coffin. But nothing he could see or hear would help him sort out his feelings about his father. He just wished he didn't have any. Mostly he wished he had stayed away. He didn't want to feel this welling up of sadness for a man who had turned his back on him when he was still a child.

The sadness threatened to replace the anger he had carried with him for so long. The anger seemed pointless anyway. The black coffin told him that he had missed his chance to confront his father. With no outlet, the anger inside him might stay bottled up forever.

He hadn't even planned to come to his funeral. Then he only intended to stop by and leave. Now he couldn't take his eyes off Jim Monroe's other children. They drew Blake's eye more than the coffin. The teen boy and girl stood close together next to their mother. Their mother was Asian, and they looked like her. Blake couldn't see any resemblance to their father. He considered that a blessing. He hated that he looked so much like his father. For the rest of his life, his father's face would always be staring back at him from every mirror he looked into. It was like some horrible practical joke.

Blake remembered the day the kids were born. He was six and excited that they were twins. He was only told about them, but he had fully expected that he would get to go and see them. But he was never even told their names. Sixteen years later, he was seeing them for the first time.

The twins' mother stood by the grave, dry-eyed and sad but not like her love had died. She only seemed truly sad when she gazed at the two teenagers next to her. Blake's eyes had strayed from the kids, and now he saw that they were looking his way. Blake moved further back, hiding among the trees. He couldn't leave yet. It was like some unfinished business held him there, maybe the need to say a final goodbye.

The girl with the long hair and glasses and the guy with the spiky hair still looked his way as Blake retreated into the deep shadows. Hidden among the trees, he saw the boy take his hands out of his jacket pockets and put his arms around his mother and his sister. Blake had no one to put his arms around, to give him comfort just by being close, and to take comfort from him in return. If he didn't find Reese, he felt like he never would.

Driving away from the cemetery, Blake had the car windows down. He didn't feel like being closed up in the car. The breeze coming in was cool. He hoped it would help to clear his head. After all, his father's funeral was only a detour. His real reason for coming back to Meadowview was still out there somewhere.

Blake's eyes searched the sidewalks as if he might spot Reese just walking down the street. All around him familiar sights of Meadowview were mixed in with new buildings and new fountains decorating the corners of intersections. Everything around him, from antique looking street signs to the high-end boutiques, said that Meadowview belonged to people with money to spare.

Those kinds of people lived in mansions on the east side of town with views of the river and the rolling hills beyond. On the west side, the mansions looked onto the Meadowview Country Club's golf course and the mountains in the distance. There were also the luxury high-rises in the center of town. That's where all the expensive shops were. In the small northern suburbs, the middle

class could afford to shop and live. The south side was the narrow section along the railroad tracks where everyone else lived and where the rich went to buy sex and drugs or just to find trouble. That's where Blake was headed but not for any of those reasons.

Though the days when he could afford to live in the good part of Meadowview were long gone, Blake wasn't heading to his cheap motel yet. He had another stop to make. He knew it wouldn't lead him to Reese, but he couldn't help himself. The place drew him much like the funeral had. It was like Blake was trying to stitch his life together from meaningless scraps until he could find his real reason for living.

Gripping the wheel too tightly, Blake drove down 12th Street. Every boxy house and bare yard he passed struck him with a wrenching sense of familiarity. This was the way he walked to Reese's house back in the day. Now the sight of each of the houses that lined up along the street made his heart beat faster. Those days were coming alive, echoing inside him. He could almost believe that Reese was still waiting there. When he stopped the car, the sight of Reese's house was such a sharp reminder of the past, it was like a slap. Blake just breathed for a minute.

He remembered that the blinds in the front windows were always mangled and crooked. The blue paint on one side didn't match the rest of the gray house. The screen on the front door was ripped in one corner. Blake could still hear the screen door bang when Reese ran out to him, smiling, forgetting not to slam it. The sound was always followed by Reese's father cursing and calling him names. That's when Reese's smile would falter but not for long.

For a moment Blake could see Reese so clearly. He was coming toward him with a wickedly determined look in his eyes. Thin and tall, with dark blond hair that was always a little too long and flying around his pretty face, he was real enough to touch. As Blake held his breath, the vision of Reese disappeared, and there was only the house.

Looking at it now through the car window, Blake saw no improvement from back then. If anything, the place looked worse than ever. The biggest change was the name on the mailbox. The

Kielers didn't live there any more.

That's why it was so strange that Reese was in town. He had no family there any more, so why was he back?

The day they met, Reese had only just arrived in Meadowview. He and his parents had moved there so his dad could work for some old buddy of his, but that didn't last. Reese's father couldn't keep any job for long, and he took out his frustration on Reese and his mother.

Reese didn't show any signs of the hard life he lived on the day he started his first year of high school. On that day, when he stood staring at Blake in front of Meadowview High, he looked fresh and way too attractive. His blue eyes didn't leave Blake for a second. Skewered by his gaze, Blake was ready to jump out of his skin. He had never felt that particular kind of uncomfortable. It hit him low in the gut. The tightness inched lower, making him feel both weak in the knees and aggressive.

"What the hell are you staring at?" Blake asked him.

"I'm not sure. Are you trying to scare me with that look? Add some tattoos and a knife, and maybe you'll have something going," Reese told him, but he wasn't Reese to him yet. He was just some nameless, pretty boy getting in his face, trying to get a rise out of him.

Now Blake knew why Reese looked down to his mouth then back up to his eyes, but he was in denial then. He thought Reese was challenging him, maybe trying to prove something. As the bell rang, Blake walked past him through the metal detector.

He knew that wasn't the end of it though. Reese went to his school now. Blake would be seeing him all the time. And every time he did, Reese would look at him like he was picking a fight.

Reese was a freshman and Blake a sophomore, so he never had to endure having those blue eyes on him in class. Blake didn't know what to make of him. Reese didn't look at anyone else like that, but they acted like he did. A few times Blake saw some assholes trying to mess with him. Reese never looked worried about it, but Blake held his breath and clenched his fists. If he saw Reese being pushed around, his whole body tensed like he was ready to rush over there and start busting heads, or more likely get kicked to death himself.

When Reese walked away without a scratch, Blake was more relieved than if he had been the one in danger of getting a beating. That's when Blake stopped holding his breath and started cursing Reese for inviting trouble with his in-your-face attitude. For a guy who was too pretty for his own good, Reese had too much fire inside him. It was as if he was telling the world to come and get him. But if Reese wasn't that way, he could never have become Blake's friend. Blake was always better at pushing people away than getting close to anyone. With his challenging stare and his fearless attitude, Reese kicked down the door and barged into his life.

Chapter 2

Finn and Dee were already feeling down after their father's funeral. Now they were heading home after trying unsuccessfully to find their brother. Their failed search only made their grief worse. If they had to lose their father to lung cancer, at least they should be able to track down their brother while he was still in town. So far, not so good.

This wasn't the first time they were setting out to find their older brother. Two years ago, Finn and Dee got up the courage to go in search of him. Their first stop was his mother's house on Tierney Lane. That wasn't a fun visit, but the one thing they found out was that Blake had left town two years before. They had started their search too late.

They weren't making that mistake again. Only hours after the funeral, they were on the case. Once again they found themselves in front of that rundown mansion on Tierney Lane. The garden was just as wild and overgrown as the last time. It hid a lot of the decrepitude of the place. Standing on the front porch, he and Dee could see wood rotting and paint falling off in chunks.

After they got no answer at the door, a nosy neighbor told them that Blake's mother was away. They asked if Blake had been around. The answer was no. That was disappointing, but they weren't out of ideas yet. They would scour the whole town for him if they had to. Too bad they had to wait till tomorrow.

Dee leaned on Finn heavily as they walked through the front door of their house and into their mother's arms. She only knew half of the reason they were so upset, but that was enough. She hugged them tightly and called them her babies. Finn would never admit it on the pain of death, but sometimes it was nice to be mothered.

That night, Finn went to bed gloomy and worried that history was going to repeat itself. If their brother was in town only for the funeral, he might already be gone.

Lying awake, Finn was preoccupied with his father's death and the brother he might never get to meet. He still managed to squeeze in a

few thoughts of Nando, his current obsession.

Finn hadn't seen him since Nando gave him a hug when he heard his father had died. Nando had never hugged him before. Never kissed him either. They kept their contact strictly below the belt. Hands and mouths on cocks – nothing tender or sweet.

"If you want that crap, go with girls," Nando told him the only time Finn tried to kiss him.

"Maybe I should. Between the two of us, I'm the only one with any interest in girls," Finn told him. He was bi, and he was pretty damn sure that Nando was a hundred percent gay. And for a guy pretending to be straight, Nando didn't put much effort into faking an interest even when girls threw themselves at him.

With his strong build and those intense dark eyes with thick eyelashes, he could have had all the action he could handle. But as far as Finn could tell, Nando only saw him. That's what kept Finn coming back for more. He might be Nando's dirty, little secret, but there was that irresistible faithfulness.

Finn was such a sucker. He had too much pride to try and kiss Nando again, but not enough to stop seeing that closeted jock. Now he fell asleep to the memory of Nando holding him and whispering, "I'm so sorry." His grip on Finn tightened, and he felt like the embrace might last forever and soothe all his pain. The best part was that Nando didn't let go until Finn did.

Next morning, Finn and Dee were ready to continue the search for their brother. As usual, they were in agreement about not telling their mom what they were up to. They pretended to be planning a sad, lazy Saturday as they sat around in their pajamas, finishing up breakfast. Dee wasn't doing a good job acting the part of a listless, bereaved teenager. While their mother was getting ready to go to a meeting at the college, Dee was guzzling coffee. That didn't exactly fit their story. Mom looked at her funny, but then she figured that was just Dee being Dee.

Doing an impression of their fat cat sunning itself, Finn didn't budge from the breakfast nook as their mother gave him a kiss on the cheek and walked out the door. On pins and needles and about a gallon of coffee, Dee parted the curtains and impatiently watched her

leave.

Once their mother drove away, Dee was jumping with excitement. "We're gonna find him! We're so gonna find him. I can feel it. Today is the day. Dee Day!"

"You're too hyper. You're going to make a bad impression if we find him. Walk it off," Finn told her as he got up and pushed her toward her bedroom to go get ready.

Two seconds later, she was poking her head into his bedroom. "Can you believe he's here?"

"Yes. No. Go get ready," Finn told her. He was afraid to get his hopes up. This might be like last time, and all they would find out was that he was gone.

"I'm all coffee-crazy," Dee said and shook herself all over, her long hair flying everywhere.

Finn nudged her out of the way so he could close the door in her face, but first he told her, "Get your overcaffeinated self out of here so I can make myself pretty. I'm about to become a little brother for the first time in my life."

That was the plan, but it wasn't that easy. It took some serious legwork before they were standing face to face with their big brother.

Lurking in front of the Sunny Shores Motel, Finn and Dee craned their necks to look up at the second floor walkway. They were standing under the shade of some sickly looking trees by the chain link fence around the pool area. The motel was dingy white, dotted with beige doors. Its sign boasted about the pool, but one look showed that the pool had been drained. Under the circumstances, the No Diving sign was hilarious.

Dee was repeating 212 to herself as they waited. That was Blake's room number. It had been a while since her last dose of caffeine, but she was still buzzing like a bee. They had been standing there since noon with no lunch break or anything. Without knowing when Blake might be back, they couldn't risk leaving for even a second.

At first they had waited right outside his door, but then Dee got paranoid that if he saw them, he might run off like he did at the funeral. Now they were waiting out of sight and splitting their time

between watching his door and staring at any cars that drove up.

They both held their breaths as an old, black Impala pulled into the motel parking lot with Blake at the wheel. Dee squealed and clawed at Finn's arm as Blake got out of his car. He was tall and attractive, and moved with subtle, masculine grace. Finn would expect nothing less from any brother of his.

He and Dee rushed up to him and tried to introduce themselves. They talked over each other, and for some reason Dee insisted that her name was Dee Dee. Crazy girl not knowing her own name.

"I know who you are," Blake told them curtly, cutting through their chatter.

"Then you should have been the one who came looking for us," Finn told him, trying for the same gruff tone.

"That's right," Dee agreed and scowled at Blake from behind her glasses.

"How did you find me?" Blake asked.

"There aren't a million motels in Meadowview," Finn said.

"We just went from one to the other and showed this," Dee held up the picture they had been showing around.

Blake grimaced at it. "That's..."

"Your spitting image. The scruffy guy in reception recognized you based on this," Finn said pointing to the old picture of their father, which was Dee's favorite.

"I flirted with the scruffy guy," Dee bragged. She was so deluded.

"She tried," Finn said. "And it was just as awkward and embarrassing as you would imagine."

"I was sexy!" Dee insisted.

Finn gave her a sympathetic look and a shake of his head.

"I'd rather you didn't flirt with strange men in motels on my behalf," Blake told her.

"That's brotherly protectiveness," Dee said pointing her finger at him accusingly.

"The point is we dragged out underaged asses through every motel until we tracked you down, so we don't want any lip from you," Finn told Blake.

"We went to four motels," Dee said. Whose side was she on?

"And now you can go back home, or to an arcade, or to a mall or

wherever," Blake said, trying to act all cool. Who was he kidding?

"Like hell!" Dee yelled. She never even heard of cool.

Ignoring them, Blake went up to his room. They were close on his heels, but he still closed the door on them. They huffed and then knocked. After only a few minutes, he opened the door and came out. It looked like he was stuffing some money in his back pocket and leaving again. Finn and Dee were right behind him.

"He's going to drive away!" Dee said in alarm as Blake headed to his car.

"Let's slash his tires," Finn said then drew back as Blake turned to glare at him in warning.

Dee went around to block their brother's path. "I was hoping that you didn't come here just for Dad's funeral, that you wanted to see us," she said to Blake.

"I didn't come here for either of those reasons," Blake told her.

"Then why are you here?" Finn asked, narrowing his eyes at him.

Blake only looked at him sharply. His look clearly said, "None of your business." Yeah right. Just because he didn't want to have anything to do with them didn't mean they couldn't bug him to death.

Blake stalked to his car. Instead of slashing his tires, Finn and Dee ran to their car, also known as their mom's old car, and a slow speed car chase was on. Surprisingly, or maybe disappointingly, Blake didn't try any evasive maneuvers. He didn't try to lose them by peeling through an intersection just as the light turned red or by making any sudden, unsignaled, left turns. He drove a little over the speed limit and eventually pulled up to the curb on Collins Street. Finn parked as well, and he and Dee joined Blake as he went into a bodega.

The place was called simply Manuela's and it smelled like something Finn wanted to eat right now. There was some prepared food under glass and the rest was just cold drinks and groceries.

"How long are you going to follow me?" Blake asked as they stepped inside right behind him.

"Until we get bored or distracted by something shiny. Now buy us lunch. We're starving." The smell of something meaty was making Finn's mouth water.

"I'll buy us lunch," Dee volunteered. She went up to the woman at

the counter and said, "What's cooking?"

"Empanadas are fresh, $1.25 a piece."

"We'll have two each to go," Dee said pointing at herself, Finn and Blake.

"Don't buy me any," Blake told her.

"Ignore him. Six empanadas, please," Dee said to the woman when she hesitated while filling their order. "And three iced teas."

"Dee Dee, stop ordering for me," Blake told her.

"This is my tutoring money. I can spend it however I want," she told him.

"Dee does tutoring. She sells her brains for money," Finn said.

Blake glared at him for making it sound salacious. Then he went up to the woman behind the counter and asked if Gabby or Roberto were around.

"You are that friend of Reese's. Gabby said he's back," the woman said while wrapping the order Dee put in.

"So he is here," Blake said. There was a stunned, hopeful look on his face as the woman nodded.

Neither Gabby nor Roberto were there though so Blake gave her his phone number and left. Stepping out onto the sidewalk, he looked dazed.

"Eat," Dee told him sticking two wrapped empanadas in his hand. "And don't worry. We'll help you find this Reese guy," she assured him.

Blake looked at her in surprise as if she wasn't supposed to know anything about it. How was she not supposed to know? She was standing a foot away from him when the whole exchange went down.

"I'm not going to ask you who this Reese is. I know you're just going to give me that 'None of your business' look," Finn told him as he bit into his own empanada.

For a while they stood on the sidewalk and ate, even Blake. He was lost in thought, staring off into the distance as Finn and Dee watched him and wondered who this Reese was to him.

*

Until he met Blake, Reese lived under a shadow. Blake was the morning breaking over his world. Everything was clear and bright. Reese's heart sang, and his blood pounded a new beat. All sorts of possibilities came to light. Anything might happen, maybe even something good. All because on his first day of school, Reese's eyes fell on a serious boy with a stay-back glare and an aggressive stance. He was the one who made a light shine inside his heart. And even after Blake hurt him, the light was somehow still there.

Reese and Blake used to stop at Manuela's after school. That was in the days when the two of them roamed the town aimlessly, always together, seemingly inseparable. It was a good place to grab something to eat, and they knew Roberto and his sister Gabby from school. Manuela was their mother, and they often worked at the bodega with her.

After his falling out with Blake, Reese roamed the town by himself. Maybe he was hoping to run into Blake at one of the places where they used to go together. While Reese hung out at the bodega, he got to be good friends with Gabby and Roberto. The two of them kept him from feeling alone, and Roberto helped him out when he decided to leave town more than four years ago.

Reese couldn't come to Meadowview without seeing Roberto and Gabby. He called them a few times, but now he hoped to see them in person. Since the bodega was a public place, Reese felt safe dropping in. As long as he didn't linger, there wouldn't be any harm in it.

Just as Reese was about to turn a corner and cross the street, he caught sight of Blake right in front of Manuela's. Reese drew back before he revealed himself. He should have just walked away, but he couldn't. He ducked back and kept out of sight and then stared.

Blake was right there, so close. He was the one who cut his heart open and left him to bleed. But even after all these years, Reese couldn't take his eyes off him for even a second. He drank him in, memorizing how he had changed since he last saw him. Reese had barely gotten a glimpse of him at his fathers funeral. But even if he looked at him all day, it wouldn't be enough.

Reese kicked himself for lingering, but his body just wouldn't

move to take him away from there. Wasn't his life bad enough? He didn't need to torture himself even more by staring at Blake.

Maybe that's why Duke used to say, "You are a boy who sure knows how to suffer and then come back for more." Thinking of his thick, insinuating voice made Reese's skin crawl. He looked hard at Blake to force every other thought from his head. It was amazing how well that worked, always did. Blake could drive out every bad thing, fill him up, make him feel free and then crush him into the dirt.

Telling himself how Blake had wronged him didn't seem to make any difference. It didn't make him look away from him, and it didn't make him move. He only walked away when he saw Blake get into his car and drive off down the street.

Chapter 3

Once they were done eating, Blake thanked Dee for feeding him and then tried to send them home again. When they refused, he shook his head and drove away. Finn and Dee followed. Dee was at the wheel as they passed a mostly vacant strip mall, a furniture rental store, and a medical supply warehouse. This was not the most cheerful part of Meadowview. It looked like their next destination wasn't going to be as friendly and delicious as Manuela's.

Blake stopped his car in front of an abandoned parking garage where skaters, druggies and runaways hung out. It had once been part of a planned shopping center that never got off the ground. Chunks were falling off the place. It was just a matter of time before it was condemned. The parking structure was well known, and Finn and Dee were strictly forbidden from going anywhere near it.

When he parked and got out, Blake came over to their car. "You're not getting out. Lock the doors and sit in the car. Got it?" he told them.

"We didn't come all this way to sit in the car," Dee said while looking around worriedly.

Blake kept that stern big brother look on his face. "Don't you have a curfew or something? Where I'm going isn't a place for children."

"Curfew? Listen to him," Finn said turning to Dee.

Of course they had a curfew, but it wasn't this insanely early. And they weren't about to admit to it anyway. Finn got out of the car to show Blake that he wasn't the boss of him. He wasn't the boss of Dee either, so she got out too.

Blake shook his head and walked away. As they trailed after him, he had to accept that wherever he was going, they were coming along. He let them walk close behind him as he went inside.

There was plenty of light coming in through the openings in the upper levels. That's where the skaters were doing their thing. Unfortunately, Blake was leading them down. The underground levels had narrow slits at the top where only a little bit of light came in. Without power, the rest of the garage was dark and shadowy. The low ceiling made Finn feel a little claustrophobic.

"I don't like it here," Dee whispered. Finn didn't blame her.

Overhearing her, Blake stopped and turned to them. "Finn, take your sister home," he said.

"You take your sister home," Finn shot back.

"No one needs to take me home. I'm fine," she said, still keeping her voice down.

"I don't know," Finn told her doubtfully. "You got kind of wimpy there."

"Shut up. I'm tough as nails," Dee claimed.

"Press on nails maybe." Finn was feeling the pain of Dee digging her nails into his wrist just as some guy was coming toward the three of them. He seemed to appear out of nowhere and Finn tensed.

"It's fine," Blake told him, noticing his reaction. "I know him."

Looking around, Finn saw that there were people in the shadows. Most of them sitting or lying down. He saw some bare mattresses and improvised furniture.

The guy who approached looked like a college boy gone bad. His hair was greasy and matted down, his clothes stained. If he cleaned himself up a little, he wouldn't seem out of place in some college bar.

"Blake Monroe, as I live and breathe," the guy said.

"It's Blake Adler. Have you seen Reese?" Blake asked.

Finn and Dee both stared at him in surprise when he said his last name. That's why they couldn't find him all these years.

"Reese was here and gone," the guy said. "He was sniffing around for somewhere else to crash so I don't know if he'll be back."

"Where else might he go?" Blake asked.

The guy looked like he was thinking hard until Blake gave him some money. Then the answer came to him.

"BrillShine is a good bet. Polander's is too."

"Polander's?" Blake said, surprised.

"The poor, old thing finally went under. Just waiting for the wrecking ball," the guy said.

BrillShine was an abandoned cleaning supplies factory, and Polander's was an old department store that had been dying a slow death for years.

"Why was Reese looking for a new place to crash?" Blake asked.

The guy looked around and squinted. "Out of an abundance of caution. Someone is looking for him, and pushing hard for information on our boy Reese," he told Blake.

"Who?" Blake wanted to know.

This time the guy didn't pretend to think about the answer, just shook his head.

"Here," Blake said and gave him some more money. "That's so you don't repeat what you told me to anyone else who might come looking for Reese."

"I'll go smoke this elsewhere. If anyone comes looking, they won't even find me here," the guy said, pleased with his take and what he was going to do with it.

Blake left the parking garage with a tight jaw and a grim stare. He hardly seemed to know Finn and Dee were still following him.

"Adler? Adler?" Finn asked once they reached their cars.

"That's my name," Blake said simply.

"You changed it," Dee said, disappointed.

"I didn't want his name," Blake told her.

"But it's our name too," Dee said.

"Our name is Huen-Monroe," Finn pointed out to her.

"OK. Then it's half our name," Dee shot back peevishly.

"Well, I didn't want any part of it," Blake said. "The man rejected me when I was five. The least I can do is ditch his name."

"I guess I see your point," Dee said, coming around to the idea but still looking sad about it.

Before they could ask him any more questions, Blake got into his car. Finn drove after him while Dee texted their mom with another bogus update about where they were. Dee looked over at Finn guiltily when she was done. She was such a good kid, which is why her lies were so convincing.

Blake gambled on Polader's and lost. He made the defunct department store his first stop, but it had been raided recently. Yellow police tape was everywhere. A few brave souls were already back to reclaim the place, but they weren't easy to root out from their hiding spots. None of them had seen this Reese guy that Blake was

looking for. The good news was that they hadn't seen him get picked up by the cops either.

Finn guessed that their next stop was going to be BrillShine, but Blake stopped Finn and Dee in the abandoned store's parking lot.

"You guys need to go home. I mean it," he told them.

"You didn't mean it before?" Finn said, but he could see that Blake was more serious now. Finn knew why. BrillShine was past the edge of town, and it had a reputation as a good place to get raped and murdered.

"You two can't be going there this time of night," Blake told them.

"It's not that late. It's not even dark yet," Dee said, but Finn could tell that she was scared and trying to hide it.

"In there it will be," Blake told her.

They still followed him, and Blake had no way to stop them. Finn wanted to drop off Dee and go with Blake, but she wouldn't hear of it. As much as he didn't want to take Dee over there, he also couldn't let Blake go alone. Having an extra sibling was already complicating Finn's life.

It was around nine o'clock when they parked on a bare patch of dirt in front of the BrillShine factory fence. The only light was from their car headlights. The windows of the factory were boarded up. From the forbidding look of the place, it was clear that none of them had any business going there. This was how horror movies started.

As Blake got out of the car, he reached under the driver's seat. He brought out a flashlight that was more of a blunt instrument than a light source. Once again he tried to get them to go home and failed.

He let them stay close and made sure to keep Dee between him and Finn. He earned some good big brother points for that. The light from Blake's flashlight helped them get inside the fence without breaking their necks on debris that was strewn everywhere. The gate was chained, but there was enough room for them to squeeze through.

As they got closer to the building, Finn could see slivers of light between the boards on the windows. They made their way in through double doors that were still padlocked, but one side had been taken off its hinges.

Slipping through, they found themselves in a badly lit, stench filled cavern. This must have been the main factory floor. At first Finn couldn't make out much, just flickering lights in corners and shapes moving around. He could hear voices and sometimes moaning.

Blake looked around until he spotted a guy his own age. For a minute Finn wondered if that was Reese. Seeing that Blake's expression remained grim, Finn knew it wasn't. Blake approached the guy. He was skinny and wore a goatee.

"Hey, JC," Blake said.

"Who's the cutie?" JC asked while looking at Dee and ignoring Finn.

"Never mind," Blake told him. "I heard Reese Kieler might be around."

"He was. He poked around, didn't like the look of the place. It can be kind of hardcore in here." As he spoke, JC's eyes flicked to Dee constantly. If he didn't stop that, Finn might have to ask to borrow Blake's flashlight and brain goatee guy with it.

"Was Reese hanging with anyone?" Blake asked.

"He wasn't really hanging. He's looking for some guy."

"Who?"

"Don't know. I was busy. All I know is he was asking Pietro about him."

"Is this Pietro still here? I want to talk to him," Blake said.

"Nah. Pietro knows people, but you don't want to know him." JC raised an eyebrow at Blake.

"You have another lead for me?" Blake asked, and JC shook his head. "Then I want to talk to him."

Blake pulled some money from the back pocket of his jeans and handed it over. That got JC to agree. "I'll put the word out. Tell me where you'll be. Pietro will either show up looking for you or he won't."

"Sunny Shores Motel, room 214." That was the room next door to Blake's. There was no room 213. Dee had pointed that out to Finn when they were there.

There was no more information to be had so the three of them got the hell out of there.

"What happens when this guy goes to 214?" Finn asked once they were outside.

Blake used his flashlight to light the way for them as they walked to the fence. He sounded gloomy as he explained.

"He'll knock. 214 is empty so he won't get an answer." Blake's dour mood wasn't surprising since their search was a bust so far.

"This Reese, who is he looking for? And who is looking for him?" Dee wondered. She wasn't asking who Reese was and, more importantly, what he and Blake were to each other though both she and Finn were dying to know.

"Don't know who he is looking for, but maybe this guy is why Reese is in town," Blake said. "His family doesn't live here any more. They never hear from him, and they don't want to."

"That's terrible," Dee said.

"Reese had a shitty family too," Blake told them.

"What do you mean too?" Finn said though it was obvious what he meant. "Our family isn't shitty."

"We'll have to agree to disagree," Blake said. Then just as they got to their cars, he stopped. "I need to find him."

"You will," Dee assured him, seeing how down he looked.

Blake nodded vaguely and opened his car door, ready to get behind the wheel.

"Are we calling it a night?" Finn asked.

"I am," Blake told him. "I have to wait for that Pietro to show up."

"Sleep with the big flashlight under your pillow just in case," Dee told him.

While Dee drove back into town, Finn was full of so many questions. The biggest one was turning from a question to an educated guess. Blake was gay, or at least he was gay for this Reese guy.

"Blake is gay," Finn said to test his theory on Dee.

"Agreed," she said cheerfully and turned to Finn with a smile.

Maybe Blake wasn't the nicest guy in the world, or the ideal big brother, but he did have being gay in his favor.

Chapter 4

Once he was back inside his motel room, Blake slumped against the door as he shut it. There was no denying that this had been one of the strangest days of his life. He was chasing after Reese while his brother and sister were chasing after him. And damn, they were tenacious. The last time he was pursued that hard, it was by Reese. Those two could give him a run for his money.

All day Blake felt like Reese had been just around the next corner. But talking to Stew and JC made him think that Reese might be more out of reach than ever. Who was Reese looking for? What the hell was he up to?

Tired and wrung out emotionally, Blake didn't even take off his shoes as he lay on the bed. His eyes threatened to close but he didn't let them. There was no telling when this Pietro guy might show up. Blake couldn't afford to be caught napping. Good thing there were always noises from the outside to snap him out of it if he started to doze off. Cars passed by on the busy street. People came and went from the other rooms at all hours. Since any of those sounds might mean that he had a visitor, Blake didn't have too much trouble staying awake. It was a lot harder to keep himself from drifting back to his high school days, where memories of Reese waited.

In the school hallways, Reese's bright eyes needled him constantly. Blake told himself to ignore him, but he couldn't get used to being pinned down by that blue-eyed stare. That's why he noticed right away when one day Reese wasn't there to eyeball him.

Reese should have been coming up the hall as Blake went to his science class. Where was he? Blake looked around for him as if they had a prearranged meeting and Reese was a no-show. What the hell? Blake didn't want to have anything to do with him, but he kept frantically searching for him anyway.

The bell for the start of class rang, and he still kept looking for Reese. As he poked around, Blake had to stay out of the way of any patrolling high school prison guards. He knew one place where they weren't likely to go – the side corridor where the labs were. The labs

weren't used that much because of budget issues. They were kept locked but were always being broken into. He could picture Reese being cornered in one of them. Fuck!

As Blake went that way, he tried the doors. All of them were locked until he reached the last one. Blake noticed that the lock had been forced. Taking a deep breath, he pushed at the door. At first, pushing had no effect so he shoved hard. He heard something break behind the door as it flew open.

Ready for anything, Blake barged in. As he stood there geared up for a fight, he saw that two goth girls were holding Reese against his will. OK. That wasn't what he expected to see. Reese was standing on one of the long lab tables, and the girls were trying to pull him down.

"I guess I'm interrupting?" Blake had to ask because he really didn't know what he was doing or what was going on.

"Are we up for a foursome," one of the girls asked the other. She was the blonde. Blake didn't know her name, but he had seen the two girls around school, always together or with other goth kids.

The other girl scowled at Blake before turning back to Reese. "No way. He's a piece of white bread. Kick him out, Simone."

"And what am I?" Reese asked, jumping off the table and landing on the opposite side from the two aggressive goth girls.

"You have that girly vibe we like," the girl with extremely black hair told him as she chased him around the lab table and Reese evaded her.

"I think it's just a matter of seconds before we all get suspended or expelled or something," Blake said pointing at the door, which was now wide open.

"Patty, we better go. He isn't up for it anyway. We should pick someone else to be our slave. He's no good," Simone said.

"Fine," Patty huffed. She glared at both Blake and Reese as she trudged out with her friend.

"That's not normal goth behavior," Reese said, pointing after them. Then he gave Blake one of his sharp looks. "And thanks for coming to my rescue."

"I was just passing by," Blake claimed as he left the lab and closed the door after Reese joined him on the other side.

"To go where?" Reese asked.

He had him there. That corridor was a dead end. Blake didn't even bother answering. With Reese following, he made his way toward the main hall so he could get to his class late.

"Just give it up," Reese whispered as they both stopped to make sure the coast was clear. "Why resist me so hard? You don't have a single real friend in this school. You might as well hang with me."

"That's not a step up," Blake told him.

At the corner leading to the main hall, the two of them were standing close, making sure no one was around.

"I admit it's more of a lateral move, but I'm bored with being bored by myself," Reese said from behind him.

"Those two girls were offering to make your life interesting," Blake pointed out.

"Too interesting. Don't you want to watch my back?" Reese asked.

"No." Blake would have said no even if Reese didn't make it sound so seductive.

Reese tried again. "Think of it as a friendship of convenience."

Without answering him, Blake sneaked away to his science class. He thought that walking away made it pretty clear that he wasn't going to take him up on his offer, but that didn't stop Reese.

Two days later, Reese and the two goth girls showed up at Blake's house. It was ten o'clock at night and their loud knocking and yelling "Blake" and "white bread" made his mother threaten to call the police.

"There's a party, and we're kidnapping you," Reese announced when Blake opened the front door and found him and the girls standing on his porch.

"In that case, I'll tell my mother to definitely call the police. Are you guys friends now?" Blake asked after a moment of not believing his eyes.

"Sure. Why not?" Patty said. "Now move your ass, white bread."

"Come on. You know they don't take no for an answer," Reese told him.

Blake couldn't deny that he was tempted and intrigued. They might even be taking him to a sex party, maybe a goth, bondage sex party.

When they got there, it turned out to be just a regular party in someone's basement. Cheap beer was served in red plastic cups, and some guy was throwing up in the corner.

"You look disappointed," Reese accused him. "What were you hoping for?"

"More nudity, less vomit," Blake admitted.

He noticed that the girls had already ditched them to talk to some other goth kids. Blake was looking around, taking stock of who else was there – no one popular or who ever hoped to be. It was a party full of the barely tolerated and the picked on.

Reese was also checking things out. "This looks like a fringe kids' party. I estimate the budget is two rusted pennies and an old shoe. You might want to keep your expectations low because the vomit to nudity ratio is going to be kind of high," Reese informed him.

With that to look forward to, Blake and Reese got drunk on cheap beer and stumbled home together. They puked in the bushes, and a friendship was born out of boredom and Reese being impossible to resist. Blake remembered how easy it was to be with him but always with an undercurrent he didn't understand. He was so stupid then. Without a clue about what was starting between them, he drunkenly leaned on Reese with an arm over his shoulder.

"I'll always have your back," he lied, but Reese smiled at him like he believed him. What kind of idiot believes a drunken promise from a spineless coward like him?

Chapter 5

After a mostly sleepless night in his motel bed, Blake got ready for more waiting. That's when loud knocking made him jump up and head for the door. After hearing his name being called, he swung the door wide. His two stalker siblings were back at the crack of dawn.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Blake asked them as they barged in.

"We brought you breakfast," Dee Dee said, holding up a bag of doughnuts. "And coffee."

"You're lucky she didn't drink it all on the way," Finn told him. He had his own coffee cup in hand.

"I'm not some kind of coffeeholic," Dee Dee said.

"The first step is admitting you have a problem." Finn looked around the motel room. "Hmm. It's both better and worse than I expected. Not as many bugs and rat droppings but more pot smoke, BO, and bodily fluid aroma than I would like," he said of the room.

"You're probably just smelling yourself," Dee Dee told him.

"I'm minty fresh and freshly deodorized." Finn lifted his arms as if he expected someone to sniff him.

"It's too early for this," Blake said and took the coffee that Dee Dee brought him.

She peered at him closely. "You don't look like you slept at all."

"Did you really expect this guy to show up in the middle of the night?" Finn wondered and offered Blake a glazed doughnut.

He took it then said, "Whenever he shows up, you two can't be here. Thanks for breakfast. Now get out."

"No way. You can't see this guy by yourself. He's bad news. The goatee guy pretty much told you so," Finn pointed out and took a seat on Blake's bed.

"Finn, you're not my bodyguard," Blake informed him.

"Of course not. I plan to run away at the first sign of trouble. Dee is the bodyguard," Finn said pointing at her as she put up her fists.

Since they refused to leave, all three of them sat on Blake's bed to finish off the doughnuts. That's when the twins started asking him

questions.

"So who is this Reese guy?" Finn wanted to know.

Dee Dee waited for the answer eagerly while wiping powdered sugar from her chin.

Blake shrugged. "He's a guy I'm looking for who is looking for someone else," he grumbled, not planning to say any more.

"Jealous?" Finn sounded like he had already guessed who Reese was to Blake.

Blake didn't deny it. Someone was important enough to bring Reese back to Meadowview. Blake couldn't help being jealous of that man. He also wondered if the twins had already figured out he was gay.

"So Reese is your boyfriend or your ex?" Dee Dee said, answering that question.

"Not exactly." Blake didn't want to explain.

"But she's in the ballpark," Finn said. "Our big brother is a man on a quest. Very romantic. I like it."

"Be serious," Dee Dee told him.

"You be serious. Oh, you're already doing that. Good job, Dee." Finn patted her on the head.

"Someone has to be the good one," Dee Dee said, swiping at his hand.

Blake refused to get into his relationship with Reese so Dee Dee moved on to a different line of questioning.

"Why Adler?" Dee Dee asked.

That seemed like a safer topic, so Blake told her, "I didn't want to be either of my parents' son. Adler was my grandmother's maiden name. She was a sweet lady. I remember going with her to buy toys for underprivileged children right before Christmas. I got to pick them out. My mom would tell her to stop wasting her money. Grandma would say, 'This little bit of money is going to bring so much happiness to a little boy or girl. How much happiness has your money bought you?' When she died, she left a huge hole in my life. I cherished her so I decided to take on her name after I left home."

"Our Grandma Xin Qian is like that too," Dee Dee said. "She volunteers for everything."

"You mean she volunteers to yell at everyone," Finn said.

"She is pretty harsh, but she just wants everyone to work as hard as she does," Dee Dee said in their grandmother's defense.

"That's impossible. The woman is a machine. Seriously, she isn't human. When I went with her to volunteer, it almost killed me," Finn said to Blake as if he expected his sympathy.

Ignoring him, Dee Dee continued her questioning. "So what happened. I mean, Dad never talked about you. If we asked, he would get mad."

That wasn't a question Blake could answer. "I don't actually know that much about it. He tossed me out of his life along with my mother. She did something to piss him off. I know there was an affair, but I don't know if there was more to it."

"So what if she did something? You are his son without a doubt," Finn said, pointing to his face.

"I'm also my mother's son. I guess that mattered more." Blake shrugged.

He couldn't explain what his father did. At five, Blake couldn't understand it, and he still didn't. No matter how old he was, he would probably never understand him. Whenever he put himself in his father's place and imagined turning his back on a five year old child and leaving him to a mother like his, the act seemed monstrous.

Since they were so eager to know, Blake told the twins what he remembered.

"When it happened, I was about to start kindergarten at Prescott Elementary, where all the little rich kids went to school." Blake remembered how his school uniform was hanging on his closet door, pressed and ready for him. The navy blue blazer with the school emblem and the clip-on tie seemed so grown up to him. That's how he knew kindergarten was a big deal.

"We went there," Dee Dee volunteered.

"Of course you did." The two of them had lived the life he was supposed to live, but somehow Blake couldn't be bitter about it. "I was excited to go. My nanny told me I would make lots of friends. Then one morning, I was hustled out of bed early. My mother and I were packed up and moved out of the house." It was shocking and frightening, but Blake didn't have as much trouble settling into his

new life as his mother did. "I went to Meadowview Elementary, just a regular school, but not according to my mother. She talked about it like it was a hellhole. She kept going on and on about how horrible it was, like I would be murdered if I went there. I was scared to death. On the first day of kindergarten, I kept looking around, wondering what was going to happen to me in this terrible place." Blake chuckled. It took him half a day to realize that there was nothing to fear.

When he tried to tell his mother that his school was nice, she said, "Don't be ridiculous! You'll be out of there as soon as your father gives us more money. You'll be going to your real school soon."

It never happened. There was no more money from his father, and his mother's boyfriends' generosity never extended far enough to pay for little Blake's private school fees.

So many years later, Blake remembered his first day of kindergarten better than what came before that. His life in his father's house was a blur – the huge, opulent house, the nannies, the piano lessons, his mother and father hardly ever home, the play dates with other kids who lived in big houses and had nannies.

Then it all came to an end. As a five-year-old, Blake was cut off from everything he had known. He never saw his father. He and his mother lived in a broken down, old house that smelled funny and made scary noises at night. There were no nannies to take care of Blake, and to cry and quit when his mother was mean to them. He thought that maybe his mother would play with him now or watch TV with him like his nannies used to, but she never wanted to.

"We lost everything! Don't you understand?" she yelled.

Blake didn't understand. He still had his mother and she was pretty. Even if she wasn't nice, she was still his mother. Only he never saw his father any more. Not ever. Not even just to pat him on the head when Blake went up to him to show him a drawing or a new toy.

A knock on the door of the motel room next to his brought Blake out of his reverie. He stood up and went out to see if it was the man he was expecting. Stepping outside the motel room door, Blake saw a guy wearing a leather jacket. He was leaning against the railing opposite 214. The guy, who was short and wiry with bleached,

close-cropped hair, regarded Blake coolly.

"I guess someone gave me the wrong room number," the man said after looking Blake up and down. He had to be Pietro, and JC must have given him Blake's description. Pietro moved as if to go inside his motel room.

Blake blocked his way. "We can do this out here."

"I don't conduct my business out in the open," he said and pushed past Blake into the room.

As he went in, the twins stepped back from the door, where they had probably been eavesdropping. Now that they were all in the room together, Pietro leered at each of them in turn.

When he tried to leer at Dee Dee extra hard, Finn stepped in front of her. Finn got a double dose of the eyeballing as he glared at Pietro. Blake regretted not kicking them out earlier.

"How are you paying for this information?" Pietro asked as he looked Dee Dee up and down though she was mostly behind Finn.

"Cash," Blake said. He stepped between him and the twins and showed him some bills.

As Pietro took them and counted them, he looked at Blake like it wasn't enough.

"I'm not asking for anything top secret, just what Reese told you. Who is Reese looking for?" Blake asked before Pietro could ask for more of his limited supply of money.

Pietro pocketed the cash and said, "A guy with one eye."

"Who's that?"

"Don't know him. He's new in town. But the interest is mutual," Pietro said and wiggled his eyebrows.

"What do you mean?" Blake asked.

"The eye patch man is looking for Reese too," Pietro said like Blake was stupid for asking.

"In a friendly way?" Blake frowned, not sure what to think.

Pietro gave Blake a leering grin. "Let's just say that he described your friend in loving detail," he said and his grin got wider and more unpleasant. God knows what his idea of "loving detail" was.

After that, Pietro left with one last look at Dee Dee and a wink at Finn. As soon as he saw Pietro peel out of the motel parking lot,

Blake turned to the twins.

"And that's why I wanted you out of here!" Blake snapped at the two of them.

They both drew back, startled.

Dee Dee was the first to recover. "What are you talking about? You need us. Who knows what that guy might have done if he wasn't outnumbered."

Blake couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Seriously? You're going home," he said decisively.

"The only place we're going is wherever you go," Finn said even more decisively.

"You keep going to bad places, talking to bad people. We can't let you off the leash," Dee Dee added.

Blake groaned in frustration. He didn't know how to get rid of them. "I do appreciate you guys doing this with me, but..."

"He's lying," Finn said to Dee Dee. "He hates it."

"Don't discourage him. He's trying to be nice," Dee Dee said to give him credit.

"Like it or not, you're our holy grail," Finn told him. "It took years, but now that we found you, we're not letting you out of our sight."

"Years?" Blake said, wondering what Finn meant by that.

"We tried to find you two years ago, when we were fourteen, but you were already gone. That's what your mom told us when we went to your house. We were kicking ourselves for not going to find you sooner," Dee Dee said.

Blake realized that he had been gone two years by then. That made him wonder, "How long have you guys known about me?"

"Since we were in elementary school," Dee Dee said.

"You know how weird it is to first find out you have a brother from some kid at school?" Finn asked.

"You know how weird it is to be that brother?" Blake said. He remembered always being aware that he had a brother and a sister, but he didn't know if they even knew he existed. It gave him a good feeling that they came looking for him. Getting to know them might even convince Blake that family wasn't a dirty word. With his own home life and the way Reese grew up, Blake had come to believe that he was better off without one.

Chapter 6

Blake had been startled by the first bruise he saw on Reese. They had been friends for only a few weeks. When Blake asked him about it, Reese brushed it off. The deep purple bruise ran from his chin to his cheekbone. It looked so wrong, and it hurt Blake inside. That bruise faded only to be replaced by another and then another. It was like a dark shadow just moved around under Reese's skin. It changed shape and position, but it never went away. Sometimes it was joined by a cut, a sprain, or an eye swollen shut.

"Shit happens. I need to watch where I'm going," Reese said.

According to him, he fell down, slammed into things and got banged up in accidents he didn't want to talk about. It didn't take Blake long to realize that no one was that clumsy, especially not Reese. But Reese refused to admit the truth. Blake wondered if lying about it, especially to him, made the truth less real, more bearable for him. That was his life. He had no choice but to live through it.

Reese's family had a hard time making ends meet. His father had a criminal record so he had trouble finding work. He also had a drinking problem as did his mother. Even when he had a job, his dad resented working for the rich people of Meadowview. He was filled with rage and took it out on Reese and his mother. It made for a hellish situation at Reese's home. That's why he always dreamed of running away. He even talked to Blake about the two of them running away together, but Reese still wouldn't admit why.

"Don't tell me you fell again," Blake told Reese after he came to school with a sprained elbow and a cut on his forehead. Blake could picture his arm being twisted back as his head was slammed into something with a sharp edge.

"Accidents happen," Reese told him tersely. The look in his eyes warned Blake to back off.

Watching Reese try to get through the day in pain, so he could go home to a man who beat him, made Blake feel sick inside. He wanted to kill Reese's father for what he did to him. Reese always told him the same thing – to stay the hell out of it. He'd say, "You

want to fight someone? Go fight with your own father."

By then Blake hadn't seen his father for years. He wasn't a source of violence or abuse to him. In those days, Jim Monroe was only a name his mother cursed. When that wasn't enough, his mother would sometimes curse Blake and hit him in a fit of temper, but she hardly ever left a mark. Her slaps were careless. She might hit him, or she might slam a door or throw a plate to shatter in the sink because she was furious that she now had to do her own dishes. It was all the same to her.

After enduring her slaps and cuffs until he was fifteen, all it took to stop her was Blake saying, "Don't even think about it." She had raised her hand ready to hit him. At his words, or more likely his tone, she lowered her hand and went to break one more thing in that already broken down house. That house wasn't a sane place to grow up in, but it wasn't as bad as what Reese had to go through.

Looking back, Blake saw for Reese only an ever-changing stream of troubles. And what the hell was going on with him now? This new information from Pietro only left Blake with more questions. Just as Blake was trying to figure out his next move with so little to go on, he got a text. It was Roberto. "R stopping by Trix to pay respects. Gabby says hi."

"To pay respects?" Blake wondered aloud. Seeing Finn and Dee Dee trying to sneak a look at his phone, he asked them, "Do you know who Terry Trix is?"

"Of course we do. Everyone does. He's the 'Craziest Magician That Ever Lived'" Finn said, quoting the sign on the side of Terry's BW van.

"But he isn't living any more. He died a few months ago. Why do you ask?" Dee Dee wanted to know.

Blake was sorry to hear about his death. He didn't explain it to the twins, just texted back to thank Roberto for the information. Putting away his phone and grabbing his car keys, he headed out the door. As he went, he asked Finn and Dee Dee, "How would you like to go to Trix?"

"Yes!" they both said as all three of them hurried to Blake's car.

Terry Trix was a wheelchair bound, local magician who also

owned the antique store called Trix. He had some crazy, vintage stuff in there. The place was always full of potheads, college kids and decorators. Blake wasn't surprised that Finn and Dee Dee were eager to go there. And for once, Blake wasn't taking them anywhere dangerous. When they were getting in his car, he wasn't surprised that they fought over who called shotgun first. He was kind of getting used to having them around.

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Reese lingered at the pizza place down the block from Trix to make sure the coast was clear. He walked by a few times and saw that there was no one hanging around inside like they did when Terry was alive. When he was alive the place was alive too. Reese remembered that there was always music playing loud enough to be heard on the sidewalk.

Though it was silent now, stepping inside was still like taking a step back in time. Cluttered and badly lit, Trix hadn't changed much since Reese had last seen it. Sure, the stuff was different, but the smell was the same – musty, metallic, with a hint of pot smoke. The pot smoke was stale now. The heart of the place was gone. Without Terry, Trix was just a store.

Reese had gone there to pay his respects, but not as much to Terry's daughter as to the memory of the place. Reese and that place had a history. The first time he showed up there, he was skipping school and wearing a black eye.

He was skipping so Blake wouldn't see the fresh bruise. Lately he had looked ready to go and beat the crap out of Reese's dad whenever he saw any sign of his bad temper on Reese.

His dad should at least have had the decency not to punch him in the face. Reese's other bruises had been easier to hide. And once he even walked around with a cracked rib.

That was before he knew Blake though. Reese was sure that Blake would have noticed that he moved too slowly and breathed carefully. He noticed everything about Reese except for one thing – how much Reese wanted him.

That first day he walked into Trix, Reese was still relatively new to

Meadowview, and Trix was a new discovery. He grinned at all the rusty signs hanging on the walls. Reese was starting to think that Meadowview was made up of shiny, antiseptic boutiques on one side and discount liquor stores on the other. This was more like it.

"You want a sirloin steak for that eye?" a voice asked him from somewhere among the stacks of merchandise.

Reese spotted Terry sitting in his wheelchair in front of a foot powered sewing machine.

"You have a steak?" Reese asked him while taking in his tuxedo with no sleeves, the tattoos on his arms, the black and white wingtip shoes. His impressive dreadlocks and a top hat rounded out the crazy look he was sporting.

"Nope," Terry said. "Let me guess. You're ditching so you don't have to explain that shiner to nosy school counselors."

"They are no problem," Reese told him. "But a friend of mine gets hot under the collar if he sees me like this. He doesn't know how to handle trouble so I'm keeping him out of it."

Years later, Reese was doing the same thing he had done that day. He was running and hiding and keeping trouble away from Blake. After all this waiting, hoping, and being afraid to hope, not to be able to see Blake face to face was a crushing disappointment. But it was better than the alternative. Whatever went on between them, he had to protect Blake.

Leaving the place a few minutes later, Reese stopped outside and stood under the Trix sign made up of mismatched letters. He took one last look and walked away, leaving behind him the first time he brought Blake to meet Terry, and all the times they poked around the store, maybe helped out with something heavy, or just hung out, joking around with Terry. But he was really only leaving behind a store full of old junk. All the memories were coming with him. Reese was going to carry them away with him, right out of town.

Chapter 7

When they got to Trix, Blake saw a young woman minding the store. He realized that she was Annie, Terry's daughter. He had only seen her a few times. The last time he had seen her, she had been fourteen or so.

He remembered that she never liked either him or Reese. While laughing about it, Terry told them that it was because she believed they were his pot dealers. Terry thought that was hilarious so he never set her straight.

Blake could see some of that same hostility from years ago as he approached her.

"I'm sorry about your dad," Blake said to her. Annie only nodded and started to turn away. Blake decided to get right to the point. "Do you remember that friend of mine? We used to hang out here. His name is Reese. Was he here today?"

"If you're here to shop, you can look around. Please ask for assistance with merchandise that's out of reach. All prices are negotiable," she said coldly and started to walk away again.

"I want that," Finn said, stopping her. He pointed at a unicycle hanging from the ceiling.

"No, you don't," Dee Dee told him. "You want that." She was pointing straight ahead at a Snoopy and Woodstock lamp and phone combination that was sitting on a shelf.

"I don't think so," Finn said, appalled.

"Yes. For my birthday," Dee Dee told him.

"You mean my birthday," Finn said. He then turned to Annie and asked her to pack up the lamp for him while Dee Dee grinned.

Blake was going to interrupt their transaction to ask about Reese again, but he noticed that Finn was pointing at him while talking to Annie.

"He's asking about Reese," Dee Dee whispered. She seemed to be optimistic that Finn could get some answers.

When they stepped out onto the sidewalk, Finn stashed the lamp in Blake's car and gave his report.

"Reese was here less than an hour ago. In and out. She doesn't know where he went only that he went that way." Finn pointed up the street.

They went in that direction while Blake tried to figure out where Reese might go. They saw a hot dog vendor, and Blake stopped.

"Hungry?" Finn asked.

Blake didn't answer. He went up to the guy manning the cart and gave him Reese's description. It was a long shot, but it was worth a try. Blake thought he might have spotted Reese, but the guy shook his head. As soon as Blake stepped away from the hot dog cart, Finn got in his face.

"Your Reese is a pretty looking, blond guy, slim and yay tall, and this is the first I'm hearing about it?" Finn said holding his hand a little above his own head.

"Stop perving on Blake's guy," Dee Dee told him.

Blake wondered why she would say that, but then Finn told her, "I'm not perving. I saw him."

That sent every other thought out of Blake's head. "Where? When?" he demanded.

"The same time I saw you for the first time in my life. He was at the funeral," Finn said.

"What? Why didn't you tell me?" Blake asked.

"Tell you when? Before I met you, or before I knew what he looked like? It's not like you showed me a picture of your beloved."

Blake huffed. "Right," he said.

"Sorry you missed him," Dee Dee said.

"And you know what this means, don't you?" Finn asked, but Blake had no clue. "He was at the funeral because he's in town for you, you idiot."

"I don't think so," Blake said.

Finn pressed on, "At the cemetery, I thought he was just hanging around, loitering or whatever, but then I saw him looking around, like he was looking for someone. Now my guess is he was looking for you."

"He wasn't looking for me." Blake was sure of that.

"So you were a jerk to him, that's what I'm hearing," Finn said, reading the situation better than Blake expected. He could probably

see the guilt written on his face.

"Yes, I was a jerk," Blake admitted.

"Don't worry," Dee Dee reassured him. "We found you. We can find your guy too."

"I guess you two make quite a team," Blake said, kind of meaning it.

"Of course. Fraternal Twin Powers." They high-fived each other then grinned at him.

As they went further up the street, Blake noticed that they had left the more colorful neighborhood where Trix was located. They were entering an area with mostly office buildings. Blake didn't see any reason for Reese to go there. Looking around, he wondered where he would have gone.

As they stood on a corner of an intersection, Blake turned to look to his right. There was nothing to see there, just some more nondescript buildings. But a few blocks further down was the bus station.

"Fuck! Reese might be on his way out of town," Blake realized.

Rushing toward the bus station, Blake cursed himself for trying to follow Reese on foot. If he had the car, he could be there already. Reese had been so close, and now he might be getting on a bus and leaving town. Blake ran, crossing the streets carelessly until he noticed that the twins were right behind him, being just as reckless. He slowed down a little so he didn't get them killed.

On first arriving at the bus station, Blake made sure Reese wasn't on any of the busses that were boarding. He looked frantically but didn't see him. Feeling only a little relieved, he went inside. He got ready to go up to the ticket counter and ask about Reese, but Finn stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"You are all wild and crazy. You don't look trustworthy," Finn told him.

Blake was ready to push past him when Dee Dee made an offer.

"You want me to use my feminine charms on the ticket guy? I'll take my glasses off and shake my hair out." Dee Dee demonstrated by shaking her long ponytail.

"Please don't," Blake begged her.

"It's a classic," she claimed.

"You don't know which way he swings. I'll take a crack at him," Finn volunteered, eyeing the guy at the ticket counter.

When he went over, Finn didn't seem to do anything more than talk to the guy before he came back.

"He wouldn't tell me if he bought a ticket, but because I acted helpless and cute, he hinted that he might have seen someone who looked like Reese. But he doesn't know where he went. See? No man or woman is safe from my charms," Finn boasted though he didn't exactly get a ton of information.

"Finn is bi, and he thinks no one can resist him," Dee Dee said to answer the questioning look on Blake's face.

Blake realized that's why she accused Finn of perving on Reese.

"And yes, we are real. We exist," Finn said as if Blake was doubting him and not in a hurry to find Reese.

"It's nice that you aren't defensive about it or anything," Blake told him while looking around and trying to spot Reese among the people sitting and waiting.

"I'm used to being treated like I'm either a mythical creature or a slut," Finn said with a shrug.

"Mainly a slut," Dee Dee threw in.

"Just because you're a virgin..." Finn started to say then he turned to Blake. "She's a virgin."

Blake was perfectly fine with that. "Good for her." He was only listening with half an ear while walking around and trying to figure out where Reese could be.

"You're a virgin too," Dee Dee said to Finn.

"Only technically. She has done nothing. Nothing," Finn said.

"Good," Blake told him. He would rather Finn didn't do anything either. He assumed that was his prerogative as the older brother.

That's when he saw Reese. He was just there suddenly. He had been leaning against the other side of a post. When Blake and his squabbling siblings got close, he stepped out and just stood there and waited. It was like he was saying to Blake, "Your move."

Chapter 8

Trix had been his last stop. With his head down, his backpack over one shoulder, Reese arrived at the bus terminal. On the way there, his feet felt heavier with every step. No matter how much he wanted to see Blake, he couldn't risk it. Seeing him face to face would shatter his resolve. He wouldn't be able to walk away ever again. Not pride or anger, nothing would be strong enough to make him leave Blake a second time.

As he waited for his departure time, Reese reminded himself that he did get to see Blake, twice. It wasn't enough, and now he didn't know if he would ever see him again.

Just as he was feeling heartsick over him, brooding in a quiet corner, he heard Blake's voice. He only said a few words now and then. Mostly he heard two other voices, both cheerfully argumentative.

Reese held his breath as he sneaked a glance from his hiding place. It was Blake. Reese's heart had been thudding in his chest like a sledgehammer. Now it beat so fast and hard Reese couldn't breathe. He thought about running, but he just couldn't. Blake was right there minutes before Reese was going to leave town. Reese thought he might never see him again, and now Blake was close enough to touch. Reese couldn't run now. He stepped out and revealed himself. Then he waited.

It had been late summer, right before Reese's junior year of high school. There wasn't much to do but hang out. Reese heard about a party out at Gresham Fields on Saturday night. It wasn't that far out of town so he and Blake decided to hike out there. They did hope to be able to get a ride back to town though. But even if they didn't, it wouldn't be so bad. The days were hot, but the nights were cool and breezy.

As they walked on a deserted country road, it was already almost ten o'clock. Going over a gentle rise, they could see all around. The moon was full and bright and only the deepest shadows remained dark under its glow. The sky was spread out like it had been unfurled

to show off every star.

Just as it seemed that they were lost for sure, they finally arrived at an abandoned farmhouse. Someone had decided it made a perfect spot for a party. The indoors were too musty and stuffy with the smell of rats making themselves at home. The party took place out by the mostly demolished barn and in an empty field next to it. The barn had only one corner and one wall that were left standing. Everything else was in ruins. Wood from right around there had been piled up in the field to make a small bonfire. It cast wiggling shadows as people danced and made out around it.

Reese and Blake grabbed some drinks and roamed around to explore a little. Every few feet they were tripping over people paired up, grinding and groping. Blake and Reese laughed, but they also finished their beers pretty fast and went looking for more. Reese was starting to feel that familiar pressure. Being with Blake while seeing and hearing other people going at it, Reese couldn't keep his mind from straying and his cock from rising.

Since he had first laid eyes on him, Reese had kept his true feelings tightly under wraps but always with a small hope that Blake might want him too. No, Reese wasn't that lucky, and he didn't want to risk the best thing that ever happened to him. Feeling his self-control coming undone, Reese bummed some pills off a girl he barely knew. She seemed pretty mellow so Reese figured they might do the trick, keep him from doing anything stupid, anything Blake wasn't ready for.

After the pills kicked in, he stumbled around for a while with Blake supporting him. It didn't last. Reese evened out. He felt friendly but not too friendly. Blake looked worried though and wouldn't let him drink any more.

"I don't want to end tonight with a ride in an ambulance," Blake told him as he pulled him away to a quiet corner.

They were in the shadows of the one standing corner of the barn. Blake was peering at him with a frown, making sure he was OK. He was so uptight.

Some unlucky couple came over, looking for some privacy and found the two of them there. Blake glared after them as they moved on, tripping over each other as they kissed and groped. Reese

laughed. He knew what they were thinking, and he wanted everyone to look at him and Blake like that. He didn't want it to be a mistake when people thought they were screwing. He wanted it to be real. Hell, he was going to make it real.

Blake was leaning next to him, and Reese rolled over like they were in bed and he could lie on top of him. He fitted himself between Blake's legs and ignored his surprised protests and the way he growled his name in warning. Reese pressed him into the wall groping for his fly, not listening when Blake said, "What the hell, Reese?" and 'No." It was like he couldn't hear him or didn't want to hear him. Reese felt him up, pressed his mouth against his, maybe to shut him up.

He didn't let Blake push him away. He cupped his cock in his hand, feeling it big and hard under his jeans. That's when Blake hit him. It didn't seem real. While Reese still struggled with the facts, his fist reacted. It shot out and slammed into Blake's face. That was an even bigger shock. The painful, hard contact was sobering. Reese stumbled back. Tasting blood, he wiped at his lip.

As the aggression of the moment subsided, he stood there panting. So much anger welled up in him. He didn't know what to do with it. He didn't want to hit Blake again so he walked away. Fighting to keep himself upright, he headed for the bonfire like a moth drawn to light. That's when he saw Doug Neumar staring at him. That decided it.

Reese woke up with a splitting headache, sick to his stomach. Memories of the night before came back to him foggy and dreamlike at first. His split lip confirmed them as real. He could still feel the exact shape of Blake's hard cock. He closed his eyes to that memory and what came after.

Even as he angrily sorted through what happened, Reese didn't yet know the worst of it. He didn't know that the next time they met, Blake would walk right past him. He would stare coldly straight ahead and not even acknowledge Reese.

Even when it happened and Blake snubbed him, Reese didn't realize that it would last. He was nursing his own grudge against Blake. They would make up one day. Once school started, they

would fall in with each other again. But it didn't happen. Blake refused to even look at him. He acted like Reese didn't exist.

For months, Reese had the urge to hurt him and also to go to him and make Blake accept him. The two impulses dueled inside him. He was at war with himself, wanting Blake and hating him, needing him and loving him until one day he couldn't take it any more. Reese left town and blindly gave himself up to whatever fate waited for him. Blake didn't want him. There was nothing left for him in Meadowview or anywhere.

*

That night at the old farm had started out with a long walk. Blake grumbled about going, but he enjoyed being out in the middle of nowhere with Reese. When no cars passed, it was as if they were the only people in the world.

He was kind of sorry when they arrived at the party. He liked it when it was just him and Reese. They did have beer and he could even see some bottles of real booze being passed around, so it wasn't a total loss.

The night was warm, but it turned sweltering fast. With the fire, the drinks they had, and all the writhing bodies everywhere, Blake was hot with an uncomfortable prickling under his skin. He was prodded by an urge to strip out of his t-shirt and lie down in the cool grass, somewhere away from the fire. He might have done it if Reese wasn't so on edge and looking for something to settle him down. If Reese was determined to get high, all Blake could do was make sure he was OK.

Taking Reese away from too much action, Blake was trying to keep him safe and cool him off. It was a bad move. They were alone, swallowed by darkness. Suddenly Reese was on him. He was at once familiar and alien. His body, lean and tight, molded against Blake's perfectly. Grinding into him, Reese felt hard, hot, and too alive. He was unstoppable. Reese's hands and his mouth were in all the wrong places.

Blake's senses were under attack. Overwhelmed, Blake struggled against Reese, but he couldn't stop him. Reese was stronger than

Blake realized. Under his touch, Blake felt weak as if his bones had melted from the press of Reese's lips and from his tongue licking at Blake's. He barely managed to push him back, and Reese was on him again, echoing Blake's no with his own. He was out of control, and before he knew what he was doing, Blake punched him. In the next instant he felt Reese punch him back hard. Blake's head hit the wall behind him.

He was jarred by the double impact but he hardly felt it. All he saw was Reese staggering back with blood on his lip. Blake was horrified. He looked at his own hand like he wanted to cut it off. No. He hadn't done that. That wasn't him. He could never hurt Reese.

He looked up at Reese again only to watch him wipe his bloody mouth with the back of his hand, the same hand he had punched Blake with. The look in his eyes mixed too many emotions Blake had never seen before. He couldn't decipher it. Did he see hate or just anger and hurt? He didn't know. Nothing made sense. Then Reese turned and walked away toward the bonfire, wiping his bloody hand on his t-shirt.

As Reese stumbled back to the party, Blake tried to go after him. His legs felt so unsteady. In a daze, Blake went over and stood on the edge of people dancing around the fire and making out or just drunkenly leaning on each other. The fire was too bright. It filled the night air with smoke that stung his eyes. Listening to talk and laughter mixed in with music, Blake searched for Reese desperately.

When Blake found him, he was pressed up against Doug Neumar. Doug's hand was halfway down the back of Reese's jeans. Blake turned away, feeling sick. So it didn't matter who it was. It could be him or anyone. Reese just wanted to get off.

On his long walk home alone, Blake had plenty of time to think even if he didn't want to. He wanted to forget that he hit Reese. Sure Reese was aggressive and he hit him back, but that didn't make it right. Not after all the beatings Reese suffered. Now Blake was just one more person who hurt him.

Blake's face and the back of his head throbbed from being hit. Even as he moved with a heavy, dead feeling in his limbs, with every step, Blake's mind cleared. The realization hit him with a force

of another punch, and Blake fought back against it. It didn't work. He tried to blame the pills, but he knew better. This thing had been brewing between them since they met, but Blake refused to see what was coming. All this time he had made himself oblivious to the truth about Reese. Reese was gay. He couldn't deny it any more.

Growing up, Blake had only heard it as an insult. With all her offhanded comments, Blake's mother had drummed it into his head that being gay was a terrible thing. She called every man who wasn't interested in paying her bills a worthless homo. She had said it even before Blake knew what it meant, but he knew it was bad. When she called Reese a homo, Blake didn't believe her.

"That white trash, homo friend of yours is outside. To think that people see you with that filth. How am I supposed to find another husband with you embarrassing me like that? Get him out of my yard before I call the cops on him," she would say whenever she saw Reese waiting for him in front of their house.

It was easy to dismiss what she said. She just hated Reese because he was poor. She wanted Blake to have rich friends. But even when others said Reese was gay, Blake refused to accept it. They were just saying that because of the way Reese looked.

Even with Reese's rough kiss fresh on his mouth, still making his lips tingle, Blake wanted to deny it. But he couldn't. He had felt it, tasted it. That was desire. That was who Reese was and what he really wanted.

Blake wanted to be angry at Reese for being gay and for what he did, but he couldn't be. He was too afraid of himself and of the violence that lurked inside him. Trying to catch his breath, Blake stopped on a silent, dark road that seemed like it went on forever. Why was he having trouble breathing?

Closing his eyes, he let the realization wash over him like ice water. He hit Reese. Reese wasn't safe with him any more. That meant that he couldn't trust himself to be around him. He knew now that he had to stay away from Reese, and he felt like he couldn't take another step. Blake opened his eyes to a sky full of stars. He wanted to scream. Reese was the only good thing he had, and now he had to give him up.

It was only much later that Blake admitted to himself the other reason he had turned his back on Reese. He was afraid of Reese's desire because Blake wanted him too. No, he loved Reese. He never wanted to push him away or hurt him. Blake wanted to keep hold of him, draw him tight against his body and say, "Don’t stop, keep going. I want you."

All these years later, Blake wished he could slap his younger self. He wished he could just go up to that younger Blake and tell him to grow a pair. But mainly he wished he could go back and take Reese in his arms and make everything OK between them, kiss him instead of hitting him. That's what he wanted to do now as he stared at him in that bus station.

Chapter 9

Finally face to face with Reese, Blake stopped breathing as his heart raced. Reese's hair was shorter than it was in high school but still long on top. He seemed more wiry and stronger though just as slim, but mostly he was so amazingly beautiful. Blake checked the urge to grab him, take him in his arms and give him a bone crushing embrace that would shatter them both. Instead he just breathed. After so many years there was Reese, still as serenely challenging as ever.

As Blake was overwhelmed by the sight of him, memories flooded back. He wanted to push them away, but they were part of who he was, of who he and Reese were to each other. He had to own them and deal with them, but first he had to keep Reese from leaving.

Blake looked worriedly at the backpack that Reese had slung over one shoulder. It told him how close Reese was to leaving town. He didn't know if he had any way to stop him.

"I was hoping... Could you stay in town a little longer?" Blake said urgently. Now that he had found Reese, he didn't want to let him out of his sight. He wasn't sure what he was going to do if Reese said no.

"With that look on your face, I guess I have to," Reese said. A smile almost tugged at the corners of his mouth and there was a hint of it in his eyes.

"What look?" Blake wanted to know.

"Let me," Finn said, butting in when Blake had forgotten all about him and Dee Dee. Finn now did an impression of Blake looking forlorn and tragically hopeful.

"Don't worry. You don’t look like that," Dee Dee assured him. Then she nudged him. "Introduce us."

"This is my sister Dee Dee and my brother Finn. This is Reese," Blake said. He felt strangely shy having them meet.

"Not bad," Reese said smiling at Finn and Dee Dee.

"We looked for you everywhere," Dee Dee told him then she couldn't contain her curiosity any more. "So who's this one eyed man anyway?"

"You saw him?" Reese asked. His demeanor immediately turned grim.

"No. Pietro mentioned him," Blake told him.

Reese didn't look happy about that either. "Why the hell were you talking to someone like Pietro?" he asked.

"Why were you?" Blake said, throwing the question right back at him.

Reese didn't bother answering, but he did warn them about the other man. "The one eyed dude is bad news. I mean seriously bad." Reese looked at all three of them as he said this.

"Is that why you were leaving town?" Blake asked.

Reese nodded.

"But now you'll stay?" Blake wanted to make sure of it, otherwise he was ready to climb on a bus right along with Reese and to hell with everything else. "You can crash with me," he offered.

"You just found him, and the first thing you do is lure him to your motel room, so sleazy." Finn shook his head with disapproval.

"Are you still here?" Blake asked him. He really wanted to be alone with Reese.

"You're our ride," Dee Dee pointed out reasonably.

"I'll drive you back to your car. After we walk back to my car," Blake said realizing where he had left his car. He turned to Reese. "You're coming, right?" he kept worrying that Reese would disappear again.

"I guess so," Reese said. He seemed amused by Blake's anxiety to keep him by his side.

As Finn and Dee Dee walked ahead of them, and he and Reese followed, Blake was in a state of disbelief. He found Reese. He finally found him, and now he was walking beside him just like they used to, or nothing like they used to. For one thing, he couldn't keep himself from staring at Reese. If he kept walking like that, he was going to fall flat on his face.

On the way from the bus station to Trix, Blake noticed that Reese looked around constantly. That made Blake more watchful too. Instead of staring at Reese, he started looking for anyone or anything suspicious but especially a man with one eye. That's all he could do for now. He would have to wait until later to ask Reese what was going on. When he was alone with him. Alone with Reese after all

this time. Blake felt lightheaded at the thought.

Standing in the motel parking lot, watching Finn and Dee Dee drive away, Blake got nervous. He didn't realize how thick the silence would be between him and Reese once the twins were gone.

Desperate for something to say and do, Blake asked, "Do you want to get something to eat?"

Reese gave Blake a knowing look, but still said yes to his delaying tactic. For a moment Blake was caught in his gaze. Familiar but sharper than before, Reese's blue eyes made him shudder. It was like Blake was standing naked in front of him.

Blake didn't like acting like such a coward about being alone with him especially when Reese could see right through him, but he needed time. His heart might jump right out of his chest if he didn't get a hold of himself. He couldn't trust himself to be alone with Reese yet. Being near him was already doing crazy things to his dick.

They went to a sandwich place nearby. It was casual with a lot of bustle from people getting takeout, but there were also several tables for eating in. Sitting across from Reese at the small table was unnerving. Blake had trouble swallowing. Reese was too close, too real.

Blake looked down from the frightening blue of his eyes to Reese's hands holding a ham and cheese on rye. He memorized every crease on his fingers. He had the urge to trace the bumps of his knuckles and measure the circumference of his bony wrist by wrapping his fingers around it. That was no good. Looking at Reese's hands just made him want to reach across the table and grab them.

Even as he knew it was a bad idea, Blake followed Reese's thumb with his eyes as he used it to wipe mustard from the corner of his mouth. All Blake wanted to do was lick the mustard off his thumb. He could then slide his tongue over his lower lip. Reese's mouth would open, and Blake would get the full taste of his kiss.

Damn! The only way Blake could stay in a decent frame of mind was to look away. He focused on what kept Reese glancing at the door of the sandwich shop every few seconds.

"What's going on with you and that man with one eye?" Blake asked.

"He followed me here or tracked me down somehow, I don't know. That's why I need to get out of town pretty soon," Reese said between bites.

"Why is he after you?"

Reese looked at the last third of his sandwich and set it down before answering. "His name is Randal Mayes. He used to be one of my regulars. When I got out of that line of work, he didn't like losing my services. He beat the shit out of me and tried to rape me. I stuck a wire hanger in his left eye. He ended up losing his eye and going to prison. I guess he's holding a grudge."

Blake's breath caught in his throat, but Reese only shrugged like it was no big deal and took a drink of his soda. From his attitude, Blake could tell it probably wasn't the first time he was attacked. He always had it so rough. It wracked his insides when he thought about Reese being hurt and having to suffer. Blake clenched his fists and pushed down all the anger and the sorrow he felt. Reese didn't need that from him.

"You had to turn tricks," Blake managed to say.

"I didn't have to for long. These last few years, I had a job and a place to stay most of the time."

Blake set aside the pain of knowing what Reese had to do to survive. He was still worried about that Mayes guy.

"But you came back here, even though this lunatic was looking for you. Why didn't you go somewhere new, where no one knows you and you could disappear?" Blake asked.

Reese shook his head. "When I came here, I had no clue he was even out of prison. He must have been paroled. I didn't know anything about it until someone mentioned that a guy with an eye patch was asking about me. That's why I've been staying away from the people we know. I only risked a short visit with Roberto because he lent me money when I left town four years ago."

"I'm sorry you had to go alone," Blake said with deep regret. At that moment, he couldn't even meet Reese's eyes.

"You should be."

At the matter of fact sound of his words, Blake had to look at him.

His eyes were so sharp and vivid, Blake felt like they cut right into his heart. "Why did you risk coming back here?" Blake had to know.

"I had unfinished business," Reese said cryptically.

"I know your parents don't live here any more. You aren't crazy enough to come to see me. Are you?" Blake asked in a low voice.

"I guess I am. I had to see you. I thought this might be my only chance."

Blake was stunned. He couldn't believe it. Finn had been right.

Staring at Reese, Blake took a minute to get over his shock. "Then where were you? I wasn't that hard to find. My brother and sister found me in one day. It was like you were sneaking around and avoiding me. Didn't you see me at the cemetery?"

"Was I supposed to rush into your open arms?" Reese glowered at him with a combination of anger and sadness in his eyes. Then his look changed to a more determined one. "I did see you at the cemetery, but I wasn't going to approach you there. It was too late anyway. By then I knew Mayes was looking for me. I had to stay away from you. I couldn't bring you that kind of trouble. But I was waiting for you for weeks before that. I searched online for new information on your family all the time. That's how I found out that your father collapsed at some charity function. After some digging, I found out he was in the hospital and not expected to recover. I thought that you would come to see him before he died. That's when I quit my shitty job and came to town thinking that this was my only chance to find you. I lurked and waited outside the hospital, but you never showed up."

Blake was amazed by his determination and incredibly touched.

"I didn't even know he was sick until after he died. He never asked to see me." That was his father's last rejection. Blake felt that familiar pang in his chest, the same one he first felt as a child.

"But you came back here for his funeral anyway," Reese pointed out.

"No, I didn't. I came back here to find you. I heard you were in town." Blake had put out the word with everyone he knew to contact him if they saw Reese.

Now it was Reese's turn to look surprised. He gave Blake a wry smile.

"I didn't plan to go, but I ended up at the cemetery despite myself," Blake told him. "I wish I had seen you there. But I didn't expect either one of us to be there. And I never imagined you would be looking for me, not after the way I acted."

"I wasn't exactly on my best behavior either. But I knew you'd come here. I knew without a doubt that you would be at his funeral." Reese looked so sure, Blake was in awe of him.

"I guess you know me better than I know myself. Maybe you always did."

"I've been trying to track you down for years. Where did you disappear to?" Reese asked.

"I went to the West Coast and changed my last name to Adler. It was my grandmother's maiden name."

"That's why Blake Monroe dropped off the face of the Earth. You made it really hard for me to find you," Reese complained.

"Sorry, but I never thought you would be looking for me. I was such a jerk to you. I did look for you though. But I didn't even know where to start."

"The way I lived and moved around, I was pretty tough to find," Reese said with another shrug, like all his worst hardships could be dismissed that way.

"I wish you hadn't left. You were too young. You had no way to support yourself," Blake said. He had worked and saved up before he left town, finished high school too.

Reese looked sad as he told Blake, "I couldn't take being here any more. I got tired of waiting for you to grow a pair. I got tired of everything."

"I'm sorry." It killed him that Reese had been out there with no one to watch his back because his best friend was a total shit. Reese was a year younger than him. He hadn't even turned seventeen when he left town. If Blake had gone with him, things would have been different.

"I didn't know how bad it would be out there. How alone I would be." Reese looked blank. His eyes were distant, like he was being pulled into some lonely place even as Blake sat across from him.

Blake reached for him but flinched his hand back when Reese looked at him fully.

"When I got to town, I went to see your mother," he said to Blake. "I tried to talk to her, but she threatened to call the cops if I didn't get out of her sight immediately."

"Typical. She couldn't have told you anything anyway," Blake said bitterly. "I wasn't keeping in touch with her. She was the one I wanted to get the hell away from when I left. I was running away from her and from myself."

"Idiot," Reese told him simply. He balled up the wrapping from his sandwich and motioned for Blake that it was time to go.

Going outside, Blake saw that the world had turned gray. It was cloudy with the wind blowing in angry gusts. When did that happen? The clouds were a deep gray that promised rain. To the east, patches of pale blue were showing through. He had been so lost in Reese that anything might be happening and he wouldn't know it. Blake turned to look at him out of the corner of his eye. The whole world could go to hell if he just got to look at Reese.

But he didn't even know how long Reese would stick around, and Blake still hadn't gotten up the courage to tell him what he desperately needed to say. Then he thought about tonight's sleeping arrangements, and he felt like his gut did a flip. A little lower, his cock showed some interest in the subject as well. Small motel room, one bed and a hard-on or two – awesome. It was too early to be worrying about that. Like Blake didn't have enough balls to juggle. Oh, God, now he was thinking about Reese's balls and how they might fit in his mouth.

"What's with you?" Reese asked seeing that Blake had covered his face with both hands and was groaning miserably.

"If another thought, sexual or otherwise, enters my head, my brain will explode," Blake told him.

"You are wound way too tight, and your mind always goes straight to sex. That's not a good combination," Reese told him like he was making a diagnosis of a hopeless case.

It was true. Blake had made a mess of things because he couldn't deal with his sexuality. Now he couldn't deal with how much he wanted Reese, and he hadn't even told him how he felt. Blake wanted to tell him, but Reese looked so tired.

"Do you want to get some sleep," Blake asked.

"At this hour?" Reese said like he was a kid and Blake was trying to force him to take an afternoon nap.

"OK then. Let's take a drive," Blake proposed. He didn't want to keep Reese on his feet.

"Only if I can do the driving," Reese said.

"Fine. Don't wreck my car."

"No promises. I've been behind the wheel less than a dozen times in my life. And one of those times was when I took the driving test."

Blake resigned himself to a bumpy ride and maybe some car damage, and put his fate in Reese's hands. They headed back to the motel parking lot.

"I was going to drive us to The Swamp Rat for some barbeque for dinner. We can kill some time until then and take the scenic route. How does that sound?" Blake asked.

The Swamp Rat was a barbeque joint outside of town and in the middle of nowhere. Plenty of people from Meadowview made the trip anyway.

"You think it's still there?" Reese wondered.

"Let's find out."

The drive toward The Swamp Rat took them out of the bad weather. They were heading east where the clouds were more silvery gray and the sun still shone now and then. Its rays burst between the clouds as Reese drove too fast on the mostly empty road.

At first Blake was tense after what Reese told him about his driving experience. Then he saw the almost ecstatic smile on Reese's face as he took the curves at high speed. Blake relaxed into the feeling of exhilaration and trust. He was ready to give himself to Reese heart and soul, and also ready to hear Reese tell him that he was scum. That was way scarier than any car crash.

The road to The Swamp Rat curved around Langston Marsh. To make the drive even longer, Reese took them down every little traveled country lane. He enjoyed driving like only someone who didn't get to do it often could. Wind was whipping at them through the open windows, and the smile never left Reese's face. Blake felt like he could live on that smile forever.

Chapter 10

Surprisingly they arrived in front of The Swamp Rat in one piece. Langston Marsh stretched out to one side of it. The reeds hid the still waters. Long billed marsh birds descended to catch their prey. It made for a nice view, but it was also hellish with mosquitoes. The parking lot was just a stretch of bare land covered with gravel. It crunched under the wheels as they pulled into a spot. Though there were no marked spots, the cars were still lined up in fairly neat rows.

Blake and Reese got out and looked around. The Swamp Rat hadn't changed much. Blake took in the sight of the weathered wood planks and the red shingled roof gone black from the smoke. The structure was dwarfed by the giant chimney. As smoke poured out of it, the whole countryside smelled like wood burning and meat cooking.

The two of them had only gone there twice. Doug Neumar and his cousin drove them the first time. Next time they rode the bus because Reese was craving their pulled pork sandwich like a junkie. With all the stops the bus made, it took forever.

Blake remembered telling himself to hurry up and earn enough money for a car so he could take Reese out there for a fix whenever he wanted. Reese was why he did everything until he fucked it all up, including his priorities.

"Let's get in there before they steal our table," Reese said, seeing another car slowing to turn into the parking lot.

Inside, the place was smoky and dark with bluesy country songs coming in over bad speakers. It was also packed. They did manage to snag a table though plenty of people just took a seat or even stood at the bar. That's where all the talk and laughter were coming from. The tables were more for quiet eating unless there happen to be kids there.

Reese went to put in their order at the bar while Blake saved their table. That was faster than waiting for the elderly waitress to make her way over to them while stopping to chat at every single table on the way.

She did bring their food when it was ready. The buns were grilled as were the potatoes. They came to the table smoky and charred with

a hint of barbeque sauce in the grill marks.

Reese looked orgasmic as he took the first bite of his messy sandwich. Blake wanted to ask him if it was as good as he remembered, but he didn't want to intrude on the intimate reunion between Reese and his pulled pork sandwich.

"I'm going to crave this stuff on my deathbed," Reese said after he was done savoring the last bite. He licked the sauce off his fingers and hummed with satisfaction.

It should be illegal for Reese to bring his fingers anywhere near his mouth, or to lick his lips, or to groan contentedly like that. Blake looked around as if he expected everyone to be staring at Reese in scandalized shock, but the other customers were elbow deep in their own food. Blake was the only one who couldn't keep his eyes off Reese or his mind out of the gutter.

"I talked to your mom a few times," Blake said as Reese munched on the potatoes. "I kept hoping you might go and see her or at least tell her where you were."

"Every few months, I called to tell her I was OK. That was enough," Reese said.

"Was it ever true?" Blake wanted to know.

"Kind of. Even when life is shitty, there's a good day now and then," Reese said with a small smile.

"Things got better for you?"

"They did, but I didn't see a way out for a while. Then this one guy, Duke, let me live with him. He was kind of rough on me. But once I had a place to live, I could get a real job. And eventually I found somewhere better to live, and I moved out." There was that shrug again that dismissed all the pain Reese endured. His words only hinted at what he must have gone through. How many tortures were summed up by "kind of rough on me"? Blake was afraid to ask, plus he knew Reese didn't want to talk about it. He had always been too good at keeping things to himself and playing through the pain.

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After telling him as little as he could, Reese looked away from the dark expression on Blake's face. He knew he had put it there, but he

couldn't make it go away without lying. Anything more he might say would only make Blake feel worse. If he couldn't protect himself, Reese could at least protect Blake. Reese stared out the small windows of The Swamp Rat. The sun was low, burning through the edges of clouds. It was so blazing bright that it seemed impossible that it could sink into the treetops and not set them on fire.

Reese tried to wipe his mind clean of the past, but it didn't work. The day he made the deal with Duke came back to him. Reese had been desperate and ready to do anything to get off the street. Duke was a big guy, and he looked at Reese like he was a piece of meat, done on the outside, still raw in the middle, and he couldn't wait to cut into him and watch him bleed. Reese knew the deal when he agreed to move in with him, but knowing and living through it were two different things. If he didn't off himself then, he probably never would.

Now that it was over and behind him, the last thing Reese wanted was to relive those days. And if he couldn't keep himself safe from those memories, he wouldn't bring Blake into them to relive them with him.

To reassure him, Reese reached across the bare wooden table and touched his knuckles to Blake's. The quick touch startled Blake and made him hold his breath. He stared at Reese without blinking until Reese got up, ready to leave.

By the time they stepped outside The Swamp Rat, the black forest in the distance was swallowing the sun. Its rays still glowed above the tree line. It wasn't dark yet, but it would be soon. Unlike in Meadowview, there wasn't anything out here to light up the night except the moon and stars. Reese knew there was a road that cut through the forest and he wanted to drive it. He wanted to find it while there was still enough light and take the long way back to town.

Reese wanted to go fast leaving the bad memories in the dust. In Blake's car, he would run down the dislocated jaw, the imprint of a shoe on the side of his face, his fingers bending the wrong way, the sound of his own strangled screaming, the stink of garbage and Mayes telling him what he was going to do to him, and even worse, Duke petting him and telling him he was a good boy. He wanted to

obliterate all those memories, but there was something he wanted even more – to take the pain out of Blake's eyes so that his gaze poured out soft with love but burning hot and tinged with a little bit of his usual uptight uncertainty. As if a drive could do all that.

After a few wrong turns, Reese found his way to the forest road. Their headlights cut through the trees at every turn. Oncoming cars blinded them before they dimmed their lights. The whole time Blake watched him. Reese turned to check what kind of expression he was wearing, and he couldn't help but smile. When he smiled, Blake smiled too.

"Watch the road," Blake told him. There was still sadness in his eyes, but they were indulgent and teasing too. The main thing was that Blake was by his side, maybe not forever but at least for now.

Even after Reese decided to stop driving crazy and headed back, it took them a while. He got turned around on the dark, unfamiliar country roads, but he managed to get them to Blake's motel. When they got out, Reese patted the car and stretched his spine. Then he looked around and across the road, trying to think of somewhere else they could go.

The late hour, the washed out brightness of streetlights, and Blake by his side, it all reminded him of old times. So many nights Blake stayed out late with him. There was nothing to do, nowhere to go, but for Reese it was enough to just sit with Blake, wasting a few hours. In hard times, his quiet presence was all Reese needed.

He knew Blake stayed out with him because he knew Reese didn't want to go home, where his father raged and his mother sat in a stupor like she wasn't even there. Blake was his shield from all that, and he didn't even know how much power he had in Reese's life. He just stayed close, let Reese lean on him as much as he needed to, and that meant everything.

"Don't you want to go get some sleep?" Blake asked, seeing Reese spacing out.

Reese didn't. He was afraid to let this day end, but he was so tired.

"I thought we had more to hash out," he said.

"We do," Blake agreed. "But if you can stick around for a while, it can wait."

Taking a deep breath of cool, night air, Reese followed Blake up the stairs to his motel room. He could stay a little longer, stretch out his time with Blake as far as it would go.

Walking into the dark motel room with Blake made Reese shudder with a sense of possibilities the room contained. He almost laughed at himself as Blake flipped on the light and revealed an ordinary, messy room with its unmade bed. To Reese, it wasn't just some grubby, overused space that never saw proper cleaning. It was a paradise and an inferno rolled into one.

Blake motioned toward the tousled sheets. "You can go ahead and take the bed, such as it is. I can sleep on the floor."

They both looked at the floor with horror.

"I better take the floor. I'm used to stuff like that," Reese said. It looked pretty bad, but it wouldn't even make the list of the worst places he had slept.

Blake wouldn't hear of it. "That's all the more reason you should take the bed. I can deal with sleeping on the floor for one night."

Reese turned to him so they were face to face. He couldn't keep a smile off his lips. It was so good to be looking at Blake again. There was no way Reese was letting him sleep on the floor.

"How about if neither one of us sleeps on the floor?" Reese proposed.

Blake started to say no, but then Reese gave him a hard, challenging look, daring him to wuss out. He did make a concession and kept his clothes on. He had to. When Reese reached for his fly, Blake looked like he was going to have a heart attack. Reese rolled his eyes and stayed dressed. Blake really was wound way too tight. Not that Reese was at ease either. He just had the advantage of being dead tired and being more comfortable in his own skin.

As he started to climb into bed, Reese realized he should have had a shower, but his eyes were already closing.

"Damn, I need a shower." Reese started to get out of bed though he was dying to lie down.

"No. You need sleep. Don't worry about it," Blake told him. He grabbed his arm and held onto him lightly. His touch let Reese know that he meant it.

Once they hit the sheets, Reese sighed. It was nice to have a mattress under him. Just being indoors and in a real bed was a gift. Having Blake next to him was only something he could dream of. It was worth every sacrifice Reese made just on the off chance that he would see him again.

It hadn't been easy for Reese to give up the security of the room he rented and his crappy job to go back to Meadowview with so little money in his pocket. Then he had to give up even sleeping indoors as he tried to stay out of sight so Mayes couldn't find him.

He did all that so he could have this feeling again – Blake next to him, quiet but attentive. Exhausted after nights of being afraid to close his eyes, even finding himself in bed with Blake didn't keep him from falling asleep in seconds. Reese sank into darkness as he tried to cling to the awareness of Blake so close, warm, and tense only a breath away.

All those nerve-racking, sleepless nights had caught up with him, and so did the nightmares. Feeling so tired, he really wished he could have slept longer, but his own screaming woke him. It was the only sound in an endless darkness. Next thing he heard was Blake's voice. Blake was with him. It was OK. But he still couldn't breathe.

Even feeling Blake's arms around him, Reese was disoriented. He thought he was still in that dank spot at the bottom of the stairs. It was dark and damp there, and no one could see what Mayes was doing to him.

Mayes had grabbed him and thrown him down the steps. When Reese suddenly found himself on the ground, the smell of rotting garbage had overwhelmed him. The pain of fists landing against his head and body nearly made him black out.

Everything was fading. He couldn't smell the overturned garbage right next to him. He couldn't take a breath, and he was close to passing out. But he could see the spilled garbage all around and that wire hanger almost within reach.

He couldn't breathe because Randal Mayes was on top of him. With his knee pressed into the middle of his back, he was pushing Reese's face into the dirt and telling him what he was going to do to him and how much he was going to enjoy it.

Just as his hand wrapped around the thin metal of the hanger, Reese realized he wasn't there. He didn't need to fight back. The smell of Blake's skin, his scared, soothing voice, and his shaking hand rubbing Reese's back filled his senses and brought him out of it.

"Sorry to wake you," Reese told Blake as Mayes guttural screams died in his ears.

"I wasn't asleep. Are you OK?" Blake asked in a hoarse whisper.

He had tears in his eyes, and Reese could see him gulp as if swallowing a sob. Reese reached up and touched his face. Stubble grazed the palm of his hand while his fingertips traced a random line on that familiar face. He was really in Blake's arms, being held tightly, protectively even as tears threatened to spill from Blake's eyes.

"I'm OK," Reese whispered and kissed Blake softly. The touch of their lips was brief. Reese felt heavy and warm, pulled down by the need for sleep. Most of all he felt safe, protected, maybe even... loved?

Chapter 11

They didn't exactly wake up together, but that was because Reese slept until noon, and Blake didn't sleep at all. As soon as Reese suggested sharing the bed, Blake knew he wasn't going to get a wink of sleep. Sleeping while next to Reese was impossible. Hell, he could hardly breathe.

Blake didn't want to sleep anyway. If Reese was willing to share his bed, the least Blake could do was give him his full and undivided attention. Just listening to Reese breathing was intoxicating. But there was also the heat of his body, his face turned partway toward Blake, his hands with long fingers slightly curled.

Blake spent the early morning hours memorizing every crease in Reese's t-shirt and jeans as his eyes traveled the length of his body. While waiting for Reese to wake up, Blake willed himself to lie still so he wouldn't disturb him.

That wasn't easy with his body and mind in turmoil over Reese. Hadn't Reese kissed him last night? In the light of day, Blake could hardly believe it. It was so quick and soft, but it was real. That brief touch of his hand and the brush of his partly open mouth over Blake's, what did they mean? No. What Reese did last night didn't count. He was barely conscious.

Blake firmly reminded himself that Reese had just come out of a terrible nightmare that held him in its grip even as he seemed to wake up. He still let the sensation play over his lips again and again. The feeling washed all through him with a shockwave of pleasure that made his gut coil.

There was no staying in bed now. Blake got up in slow motion, watching to make sure Reese stayed asleep. Once he was in the bathroom, he kept himself from jerking off with superhuman effort. He didn't deserve to get off at Reese's expense.

Reese had been restless during the night, but slept peacefully even as sunlight broke through where the ugly, motel room curtains didn't meet properly. The nightmares made Blake worry about him even more. The protectiveness he felt was overwhelming, even if it was too late. Reese had to go through the roughest part of his life alone.

Blake vowed that he would never let Reese feel alone ever again.

Close to lunchtime, Blake saw signs that Reese would wake up soon. There were small movements, and he turned a few times, taking advantage of the rest of the bed now that Blake wasn't crowding him. The motions of his limbs as he still slept seemed like complaints against waking.

Seeing him like that, Blake was dying to run his hands over him. He wanted to feel the rough fabric of his jeans and the soft texture of his t-shirt. Then he wanted to bury his face in every crook and every space and inhale him.

Blake had screwed things up with Reese once before. He wasn't going to do it again by mauling him when he obviously needed rest. Last night they were in the same bed. It was as intimate as they had ever been even if nothing happened. Fighting to get himself under control, Blake decided this was a good time for him to go and get some takeout.

Though it was closer to lunch, he got coffee and a breakfast of bacon, sausage, and pancakes. Carrying it back to the motel room, Blake tried to get through the door quietly. Head turning on the pillow, Reese blinked at him when he heard him come in. Smelling the coffee and the food, he didn't need to be told what was up. He climbed out of bed and went to use the bathroom while Blake set up the food on the small table.

The squeaking of the Styrofoam containers broke the silence as they started eating. Since Reese wasn't in the mood to talk, Blake told him the boring things he had been up to. Mainly he talked about college and his job. Listening to him, Reese kept smiling like it made him happy to hear that Blake lived in relative comfort while he suffered. Between them, Reese was the smart one. He deserved to go to college. Blake tried not to show how guilty he felt. Reese would have just told him where to stick it.

Instead, Blake focused on Reese. Watching him stuffing his face with pancakes, and before that, watching him sleep, were such simple pleasures. It was strange to enjoy something like that so much, but that's what Reese did to him. Now that he had been apart from him for so long, Blake appreciated every second he spent with him. Everything between them seemed at once brand new and

comfortably familiar. More than anything, things seemed unfinished.

"Thanks for breakfast. That was good stuff," Reese told him and went to take a shower.

Blake scooped up the takeout containers into the trash. Then he listened to the water running in the shower and tried his best not to picture Reese naked. But having held him in his arms, Blake couldn't help translating the feeling of him into an image. He was mentally stripping off Reese's clothes, soaping him up, then letting water run over him.

But in mid fantasy, his mind snagged on the facts – the reason Blake had been holding Reese. Last night, even after his eyes were open, Reese struggled to free himself of the grip of that nightmare. Watching him suffer was agony for Blake. All he could do was hold him as tightly as he dared and try to reassure him that he was safe. Reese's face did become peaceful just before he fell asleep again. He always seemed so resilient, but he had been through too much. His bad experiences were tormenting him.

Blake had been lost in thought so he didn't notice the shower turning off. Lying half on the bed with his feet on the floor, he was startled when Reese came out. Blake sat up and watched him. Bare-chested and in his jeans, Reese was wiping his wet hair with a cheap, motel towel. He immediately noticed Blake's heavy mood.

Putting the towel around his neck, he came closer, eyeing Blake curiously. He stood right in front of him in the space between Blake's knees. At first he only looked down at him with a thoughtful expression, like he was trying to figure out something about Blake that puzzled him. Then he slowly reached out his hand and rested it on Blake's shoulder. His other hand came up to Blake's face.

"When did you know?" Reese said and his damp hand seemed to burn Blake's skin.

"Know what?" Blake asked.

"Everything," Reese said like he wanted to make his question even more difficult to answer.

"Everything? I hardly know my ass from my elbow. You want a timeline for my fuck-ups? First I found out you left town, and I felt like someone stabbed me in the gut. Then I left home months later. I

tried to find you, but I couldn't. At that time I thought my crazy, intense feelings for you were a fluke. Little by little, I realized I was gay. I looked for you for years and didn't have any luck finding you until now."

Scowling at him, Reese focused on just one piece of information. "You thought I was a fluke? Are you stupid?"

"I only felt that way about you. I didn't know it had wider implications," Blake said lamely.

"You are just plain dumb."

"I know. I'm sorry. And I'm sorry I hit you," Blake said, finally getting the words out. He knew that worlds weren't enough to redeem him. He was raised by a woman who didn't know the true value of anything, but that was no excuse. Reese had it a lot worse at home, and he didn't turn out shitty like Blake. The worst thing was that he wasn't there when Reese needed him. He failed him, and even if Reese forgave him, Blake would never forgive himself. All he could do now was be good to Reese.

Hearing Blake's apology, Reese said nothing at first. His expression was unreadable.

"Don't worry about it. I was used to it," Reese told him, dismissing his apology and turning away. He took the towel off his shoulders and pulled a t-shirt from his backpack and put it on.

Blake stood up and tried to explain. "I should have told you I was sorry then, but I was afraid to be around you."

"You were that scared I would jump you?" Reese asked, eyeing him sharply.

"No. I felt so out of control. I was afraid of hurting you, of hitting you again," Blake tried to explain desperately. He felt like his blundering apologies might drive Reese away.

"Maybe it wasn't a problem," Reese said, his voice both cold and insinuating. "Maybe I liked it. I might be one of those people who get abused and then crave it forever. Duke said I was made for it." With every word, Reese took a step closer until he was face to face with Blake. Taking it further, he pressed into him and backed Blake against the edge of the bed.

"Don't say that," Blake begged him just as Reese pushed him to sit back down.

"Don't worry. I only like it when it's you," Reese said as he climbed on the bed with one knee on either side of Blake and sat in his lap.

"For God's sake." Even though he knew Reese didn't mean it, Blake was horrified.

"What? You don't like that?" Reese shoved Blake flat on the bed.

"I know that's not who you are. I never wanted you to have one bad moment in your life," Blake said, feeling helpless to say anything that would make things right between them.

"Then how could you let me think you hated me?" Reese pressed down on Blake's chest with both hands as he leaned down to stare into his eyes angrily.

Blake wanted to explain, but Reese kissed him before he could answer. Already breathless, Blake thought he would die. The kiss was hard, painful to his heart, which thudded a deafening beat under Reese's hands.

His arms were reaching for Reese. His hands were sliding up his body, tangling in his damp hair, cupping his face. His whole body rose toward that kiss until Reese abruptly broke it off.

"That's what you do when I kiss you, not hit me," Reese told him.

They were both breathing hard now, erections crowding the fronts of their jeans.

Blake moaned. He didn't know if it was from all the love and pain in his heart or from how much he wanted Reese. Blake thought his heart would burst. He was afraid to move. His hands were frozen on Reese's hips. Then Reese climbed off him suddenly. Blake still lay there like he was paralyzed.

"I don't want to sit in here all day. Let's go outside," Reese said.

Blake followed him like a sleepwalker. He felt as if he had been punched in the gut. He lagged behind Reese. In the last few minutes, Blake had forgotten how to walk. At the top of the stairs, Blake saw Reese stop further down and turn to look at him.

"You finally found me. Is it everything you dreamed of?" he asked.

"Yes," Blake answered without thinking. It was true. Reese was there, just a few steps ahead of him. He could be as mean as he wanted to be. Blake deserved it. He would take what he had coming and never let him go.

Standing at the bottom of the steps, Reese looked around. Blake stopped right behind him and resisted the urge to bury his face in the crook of his neck and inhale the freshly clean scent of his skin. Still under the influence of his hard-on and the kiss that put it there, Blake was standing dangerously close to Reese. While Blake was mesmerized by the nearness of his body, Reese pointed toward a thrift store down the road.

"I want to check that out."

Blake remembered how much he liked to poke around, looking at weird old stuff in smelly stores and at garage sales. This was the first time Blake looked forward to being dragged along. Whatever they did was fine as long as Reese was there.

Reese certainly took his time at the thrift store and then came out empty-handed. Blake wondered if he did it just to test his endurance. He would have to do a lot better than that. Blake was prepared to do anything to stay by his side.

As they were walking back up the street, the empty motel pool caught Reese's eye. They jumped the fence and went up to the edge. Deep cracks veined the bottom. Rainwater had accumulated in there and turned green and slimy. Plenty of debris had made it in including chicken bones, broken bottles and empty beer cans.

In the silence of the moment, Blake asked, "Do you want to tell me about your nightmare?" He didn't want to pressure Reese, but he wanted him to know that he was ready to listen.

Reese didn't answer his question directly. He stared at the bottom of the pool and spoke like he wasn't addressing himself to Blake at all. "I hate being so full of bad memories. It's like being stuffed full of garbage. You carry it around, can't get rid of it."

"I wish I could do something, at least make up for my part of it," Blake said.

"Maybe you will," Reese told him, but he still looked straight ahead.

"I want you to know that I'm not going anywhere. And I won't run if you push me, so go ahead and do whatever you need to," Blake urged him.

"Don't worry. I'm not ready to take it easy on you yet," Reese said

and turned to him with a smirk. He stepped forward so he and Blake were chest to chest on the edge of the pool. "I'll be busting your balls for a while," he promised Blake.

Chapter 12

It had been an exciting two days thanks to Blake. Because he made them chase him down and then run all over town chasing his boyfriend, Finn and Dee couldn't really dwell on their father's death or what it meant in their lives. Even as he reminded them of their father so much, Blake was so totally different from him. Sure he had that self-assurance which tipped over into arrogance every now and then, but he was much kinder at heart. Though he seemed impatient sometimes, Blake didn't have that undercurrent of irritation that always threatened to turn into an icy cold rage.

Finn could remember his father staring him down when he got out of hand. Even when he was little, Finn could bring out that look in his eyes. Every time it happened, either his mom or Dee would be there. His mom would step in, calmly assert herself and diffuse the situation. Dee was more of a wildcard, but she knew how to disarm their dad too. She could even make him smile.

Finn didn't have that gift. He always felt it was just a matter of time before the brittle truce between him and his father snapped. Then Finn would be cast out just like his older brother was. He never imagined that it would be his father's death that made the fragile peace between them so permanent. It was strange how sad it made Finn to know that his father would never get angry with him again.

It really was a good thing Blake was there to keep him from wallowing in weird, maudlin crap like that. Unfortunately, it was Monday so Finn and Dee couldn't spend all day bothering Blake and his boyfriend. That's why they made after school plans to bug them. They raced from school straight to Blake's motel.

"What do you think they got up to last night?" Dee wondered while Finn drove them over there. "One bed. Two horny guys."

"Keep it clean, girlie," Finn said then he thought about Blake and Reese, but not like that. He was trying to figure out how they fit together. Not too bad. "He isn't my type, but I can kind of see how Reese could get stuck in a guy's head," Finn said with approval.

Dee sort of agreed. "He looks grubby, but I bet he smells pretty good."

"Young lady, you're grounded," Finn told her. "You are not allowed to think about how guys smell."

"Shut up, I'm the same age as you," Dee claimed.

"Our birth order is well established. You are, and always will be, the little sister," Finn informed her for a thousandth time.

While Finn drove the too-familiar streets of Meadowview, he considered Blake and Reese separately and together. From thinking about those two, it didn't take much for Finn's mind to meander over to thinking about Nando. Dark instead of blond, with deep brown eyes, Nando couldn't have been more different from Reese. Finn loved how thick his muscles were. He didn't even need to flex to get Finn drooling. Too bad he didn't want to be caught dead anywhere near Finn in public. Finn eased off the gas pedal when he noticed the speedometer inching up. Nando's attitude pissed him off. It even pissed off Dee, and that wasn't easy.

"He should be proud to be with you," Dee said in a show of sisterly loyalty. "Even if you are a bonehead."

Damn right he should be. Finn thought back to how frantic Blake had been when it looked like Reese might leave town. Finn wanted Nando to go crazy over him like that. He wanted to see his brown eyes blaze and then melt just because Finn was suddenly standing in front of him. He wanted to see sparks fly and souls collide like he had seen when Blake finally caught up with Reese. And all he got was Nando turning away and telling him he better not let anyone find out what they were doing.

The hard look in his eyes when he said things like that was hot in a threatening kind of way. It made Finn angry, bitter, and ready to get on his knees and suck the life out of him all over again. It was even better when Nando pushed him down, ripped open his fly and sucked him off almost violently. He remembered Nando's strong hand pressed hard over his mouth, keeping him from making even a single sound. Good thing too or the whole school would have heard Finn screaming in ecstasy from inside the gym equipment room.

Finn now grinned to himself at the thought, and Dee caught him at it.

"You're having pervy thoughts! About Nando, I bet. Aren't you?"

she accused him.

"Use your fraternal twin mind-reading superpowers for good, not evil," Finn told her as he pulled into the depressing, motel parking lot.

As soon as they got out of the car, they spotted Blake and Reese inside the fenced in area around the empty pool. They must have jumped the chain link fence. Now they were standing on the edge of the pool, looking in. Finn and Dee went over to the fence.

"I think they're serious about that no diving rule," Finn called out to them.

"Did you guys eat?" Dee asked them.

"Kind of," Blake told them.

"But we could eat again," Reese said. He was smiling, but Blake didn't look happy to have his time with him interrupted. Too damn bad.

"I have a plan," Dee announced, turning to Finn. "Let's go get us sandwiches, and bring them back here to eat by the pool."

The two of them did the twin powers salute and they were off on their mission. Running out of the motel parking lot, they crossed the street diagonally to get to the sandwich shop.

It didn't take them long to come back. Hearing the fence rattle, Blake and Reese turned to see Finn climbing then jumping to the other side. Dee passed the bag with sandwiches over the fence to him. Just as Finn was starting to wonder how she would climb the fence in her skirt, she told the guys to look away.

"Stupid uniform," she grumbled as they all turned around.

While she climbed over, Finn tried to read the handwritten scribbling on the brown paper the sandwiches were wrapped in.

"There better be a buffalo chicken in here," he said. Finn had been busy answering some texts while Dee did the ordering.

"They didn't have it. I got you turkey and a packet of hot sauce," Dee told him. She pulled his sandwich out of the bag and handed it to him. "I didn't know what you guys like so I got you Italian because everyone likes Italian," Dee said to Blake and Reese.

"It's fine," Blake said.

"Thank you," Reese said. "Italian works for me."

"Good. You could use some more meat on your bones," Finn said, looking at Reese critically. He couldn't help comparing him to Nando, and Nando won hands down.

"Reese is perfect," Blake snapped at him.

Red-faced, Blake got busy unwrapping his sandwich and refused to look up. He knew they were all staring at him and enjoying his embarrassment, especially Reese.

Now that they each had a sandwich, they sat on the edge of the pool with their legs dangling over. Finn looked down and saw several cracks and a whole bunch of garbage.

Sitting on the other end from him, next to Blake, Reese eyed the beige Saturn sedan they had arrived in. "How come you have that seriously dorky car? That's not my idea of a rich kids' ride," he said.

Finn couldn't agree more. "Don't I know it. Dad wanted to buy us two sporty little numbers in colors of our choice when we got our driver's licenses, but Mom wouldn't let him. Sometimes you can tell that Grandma raised her strict. She gave us the Saturn. It was Mom's old car from before she married Dad. She kept it at Grandma's and gave it to us to fight over. Dee is a terrible driver, but I rule the road," Finn claimed.

"You're twice the man she is," Blake told him.

"Dee isn't a total loss," Finn had to admit. "She is adorkable with that whole cute, Asian schoolgirl thing going on. I mean she has the uniform and everything."

Instead of taking it as a compliment, Dee punched his arm and almost made him drop his sub. "I'm sitting right here! Don't you fetishize me!" she yelled.

"Don't worry about it. I'll beat to death any guy who even looks at you," Finn assured her. Turning to Blake with a deadly serious look, he said, "And I expect you to help."

Finn knew he could count on him. Blake wanted to be the coolheaded older brother, but some brotherly instincts couldn't be overruled.

"You are on board. I can tell," Finn said and clapped him on the back in the name of brotherly unity.

That's when Blake noticed Reese grinning at him. Finn noticed it too and took full credit.

"This is all me. I'm making him look good." Finn tapped his own chest.

"Something is," Reese said, and Blake started blushing again.

They hadn't been there long before the motel manager chased them out. They walked around with sandwiches in hand. Dee forgot to get them drinks, so they headed toward the Breezeway Shopping Center to buy some. It wasn't a bad place to walk around. There were some covered walkways with benches and planters full of marigolds. They bought some drinks and grabbed a bench so they could finish eating.

Once they were done eating, they went walking around. That's when Finn spotted Nando. He was coming toward them, and Finn prepared himself for an awkward meet and greet. But it didn't happen. Damn him, Nando was crossing to the other side of the shopping center to avoid him. As unhappy as Finn was, the look Dee threw after him was vicious. Seriously, if looks could kill, Nando would be reduced to a bloody smear on the sidewalk.

Both Finn and Dee were staring so hard at Nando that Blake couldn't help but notice. "Is that's someone you know?"

Dee grumbled while Finn shrugged.

"Just a guy I'm seeing," Finn said. The more nonchalant he tried to act, the guiltier he looked. Plus Dee grumbled louder.

"What's the problem with him?" Blake asked.

"He's in the closet," Dee tattled just as Nando went around a corner and disappeared from sight.

Blake turned to Finn, who confirmed it. "He's in the closet and on the baseball team. It kind of evens out. He refuses to be seen with me so I only see him when I can't help myself, which is all the time. I'm such a slut."

"So what's the deal with him?" Reese wanted to know between slurps of his soda.

"You mean what's keeping him locked up in the closet?" Finn said. "It's his dad. He is a total baseball fanatic and a homophobe, and Nando is his pride and joy. Nando wants to be the perfect son. He wants to fulfill all his father's expectations, be a big baseball star, inherit the Samaro Super Nonstick Coating empire, make him proud."

"Maybe he'll wise up," Reese said and looked at Blake sideways.

"You shouldn't waste your time on him until he does," Blake said harshly. He was playing the gruff older brother to perfection.

"Really?" Reese asked him with a smirk.

Finn had a distinct impression that their conversation wasn't about him or Nando. He shrugged then pointed his cup of soda at Blake. "OK then. You're my big brother. Forbid me to see him."

"I forbid you to see him," Blake said blandly.

"No, put some bass into it," Finn told him.

"All the bass in the world isn't going to keep you away from that guy," Blake predicted.

"Come on, be the stern older brother I need to keep me in line," Finn demanded.

Blake only laughed. It looked good on him. And there was Reese ogling him with those baby-blues like Blake was an ice cream cone that was about to drip, and he had to lick him up right now. Blake had a completely different way of looking at Reese. One moment it was shy, averted glances, and the next it was a smoldering, possessive stare that could have lit Reese on fire.

Like every other time he contemplated those two, Finn's mind went straight to Nando. His looks were burning hot too, but his actions spoke louder. Like when he crossed to the other side of the promenade to avoid him. Every time he acted like that, Finn tried to deny that it hurt.

As he moped, Finn looked at Dee then followed her gaze. She was looking at a cute guy who was busy on his phone. When the guy looked up, she smiled at him.

"Are you smiling at that guy? You like that guy?" Finn asked her. "Just so you know, smiling at a guy is the same as telling me to go kick his ass."

"Shut up," Dee said defensively.

"Don’t forget, I know what guys are like. Intimately." Finn wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"Stop with the double standard. I have needs too," Dee told him.

Well that was nauseating. Blake cringed hearing her, but Finn went a step further.

"No, you don't," he said. "You are going to be a nun."

"I think you have to be at least a little bit religious to be a nun," Dee informed him, but it didn't change his plans for her.

Not liking his smug attitude, Dee turned to Blake. "He acts like he has all this experience. He only lusted in his heart until he hooked up with Nando. And they've never had sex. It's just been handjobs and blowjobs back and forth."

"Why do I tell you things?" Finn asked.

"So I can embarrass you later," she said succinctly.

Finn had never been any good at keeping secrets from her. She would just peer at him from behind her glasses, use her fraternal twin mental powers, and he would spill his guts to her.

"What about with girls?" Blake asked. He told Reese, "Finn is bi."

Finn launched into his usual speech. "And yes, we exist..."

Blake cut him off. "Don't start with that. Just answer the question."

"Freshman year, I had a thing for this sophomore girl. She had amazing, long, strawberry blond hair. It was curly, and she would plait it into this messy braid that pointed straight to her heart shaped ass. It was like an invitation or an advertisement. It was hot," Finn said. The appeal was obviously lost on both Blake and Reese.

"Then she cut her hair and you lost interest. You're so shallow," Dee said with a disapproving shake of her head.

"That's not why. The hair was just one thing that changed about her. She got to be stuck up. She was hanging out with all those Oak Lane bitches, and they were a bad influence on her," Finn said. Of course Oak Lane was where they used to live too, but he and Dee escaped without getting any of the bitchy on them.

"I think it was because she cut and straightened her hair," Dee insisted.

"That certainly didn't help," Finn admitted.

Dee smiled triumphantly. Then some cute shoes in a store window caught her eye, and she went in to try them on. The three guys hung around outside, waiting for her and watching the people passing by. Reese saw someone he knew cleaning the glass door of the store across from them, and he went to say hi.

Alone with Blake, Finn decided to pick his brain.

"It's your job as the big brother to impart sage advice. So do you

think I'll fall out of love with Nando any time soon? I'm usually pretty fickle, but I can't seem to shake it off this time," Finn said. It kind of worried him, but he also kind of didn't want to stop feeling the crazy highs Nando brought on. He could do without the lows though, like the one that was hitting him now.

"I don't know anything about falling out of love," Blake told him. "I've only ever been in love with one person, and I stayed in love with him. That's why I'm here." He looked over at Reese where he was still talking to the girl with a bottle of Windex in her hand.

Finn hoped that being stuck on one guy like that wasn't genetic. He couldn't afford to feel this way about Nando forever. Since he met him, Finn could only admire girls and guys in passing. His mind always shifted back to Nando. That was no good. One advantage of being bi was that he had his pick of both sexes. The way he felt right now, he might as well be a Nandosexual.

Finn and Dee said goodbye to Blake and Reese back in front of the motel. On the way home, Finn tried to steer his mind away from Nando as Dee drove. Then he nearly had a heart attack when Dee almost ran over Nando. When she turned into their driveway, he was just standing there. Dee hit the brakes just in time and stared daggers at Nando as he got out of the way.

"I'll back up and have another go at him," Dee threatened, but she just parked the car.

Finn was too surprised to tell her what a terrible driver she was. What the hell was Nando doing there? He got his answer after Dee slammed the car door too hard then stalked inside the house, her ponytail bouncing. If this was a few years ago, she would have stuck out her tongue at Nando. That left Finn alone with Nando in the shade of the front garden.

Finn went up to him. "I didn't even think you knew where I lived," he said, still in shock over seeing him standing in front of his house.

"Who were those guys you were with?" Nando said, not even pretending that he had any other reason for coming over.

"Oh, you're jealous. Wait. Let me enjoy this. Also let me enjoy the irony. Actually, if you had come over to meet them like a normal

person, you would have found out that one of them is my brother and that the other guy is his boyfriend."

"Your brother is gay too?" Nando asked, surprised.

"Yeah, isn't that awesome? And I'm bi," Finn reminded him.

"Whatever," Nando said and looked away.

"It's not whatever. It's who I am. And you are... relieved maybe? I bet it's a load off your mind that I'm not hooking up with either of those guys, or both of them," Finn needled him.

"I don't give a crap," Nando lied though the facts of the case were on record.

"So that's not the reason you came by my house. Where you've never been before. Want to meet my mom?" Finn baited him.

"Hell, no." Nando looked horrified.

"Want to mess around?"

The answer was silence, but Nando's eyes were already darting around, looking for the right makeout spot.

The big bushes all over the yard gave them plenty of places to hide. Nando picked a spot where he could push Finn up against the wall while flowering shrubs hid them from sight on all sides. He tugged at Finn's clothes until he found his way under his shirt and down the back of his pants. Nando stroked his hole with his fingertip while grinding into him and staring at him like he owned him and wanted Finn to know it.

Chapter 13

On arriving back at the motel room and seeing the bed, Blake was reminded of the kiss that morning. He could still feel how Reese's thighs fit around him, the pressure of his hand on his chest, how his hand closed, grabbing a fistful of his t-shirt as Reese's tongue thrust inside his mouth. It seemed like a long time ago but also like it just happened. A part of him wanted to believe that they might get back to it any second as if they had just paused for breath before plunging in again.

Blake glanced over at Reese. He was looking for any sign that Reese might want to continue what they started, but he seemed very casual. His relaxed attitude was nothing like the tension and yearning that Blake was suffering and trying to hide. Disappointed, he looked away. He wanted to see his own feelings bouncing back, reflected and shared even if he knew he had no right to that.

The kiss that morning had been both painful and sweet, and Blake craved it again. He wanted to feel and taste Reese's mouth and every other part of him. Knowing he was asking for something he didn't deserve, Blake wanted it anyway. But he didn't want to jump him so soon, even if Reese did light the fuse. Blake just couldn't be sure what Reese kissing him was all about. For now, he had to tread carefully, follow Reese's lead and not screw things up by being a total horndog when Reese didn't seem interested.

At the moment, Reese was looking around the motel room as if he was taking a measure of the small amount of space and the scuffed, bolted down furniture.

"Your brother and sister are cute. They actually look good in those matching private school blazers," Reese said without turning to look at Reese. He was peering closely at a print on the wall of a yellow wheat field under a purple sky.

Blake remembered seeing kids wearing those uniforms and being glad he got to wear regular clothes to school. "We used to make fun of those kids," he reminded Reese. Then he had to add, "And I always thought how narrowly I escaped being one of them."

"But you like playing big brother to the twins." Reese turned

around to face him. Leaning on the wall next to that picture, he seemed amused by Blake in the big brother role.

"What choice do I have? They won't leave me alone," Blake told him, hiding how much meeting them and spending time with them meant to him.

"It's the only way to get to you," Reese said.

"Maybe that's why I like them. They remind me of someone," Blake said while staring at Reese meaningfully.

Reese smiled but there was something wicked behind his eyes. "We asked Finn about his experience. What about you?" he said.

Blake was a little startled by the question. He felt like that was one more thing for which he had to ask Reese to forgive him.

"I might have tried to forget you by picking up a guy or two. Didn't work." Blake realized that being with anyone else was worse than useless. It was wrong. There was only Reese for him. No other man could so much as quiet his need much less satisfy it. "As far as I'm concerned, you're the only man in the world. I just wish I'd known it sooner."

Reese looked off to the side. Blake couldn't read his expression, and he worried that he had said too much.

Then Reese spoke in a quiet voice. "I've been with more men than I want to remember. While I was out there servicing other guys, I was obsessing over you – where you were, what you were doing, if maybe I could be with you one day. But you were pretty clear you wanted nothing to do with me." Now Reese stared at him hard.

Blake felt that look like a blow. "I was so afraid of hurting you. I was confused, and what you did confused me even more. I felt I was under attack from all sides," Blake said. He remembered a tight feeling and a sense of danger and fear. He couldn't admit to himself that either he or Reese were gay. Not being able to admit his true feelings, didn't mean he didn't feel them. He felt too much even. Love, fear and even jealousy were at war inside him. "I saw you go off to hook up with Doug Neumar, so I thought you were after anyone, that you just wanted to get off, and I was nothing more than the nearest dick."

"Neumar?" Reese said like he could barely be bothered to remember him. "I was with him because I was mad at you, and I

knew you hated him. You hurt me. I figured why the hell not let Neumar have a go at me. He'd been after me for months."

Blake remembered seeing Doug eyeing Reese, standing too close to him. Every time he saw Neumar breathing down his neck, Blake wanted to kick his ass. And that still didn't give him a clue about how he really felt about Reese.

"So I pushed you into it?" Blake said. He knew he had no right to be jealous, but he couldn't help it. He didn't want to think of Reese with anyone else, and he had nightmares about him with Neumar.

Reese gave him a wry look then grudgingly admitted, "He couldn't get anything off me. I was too pissed at you. After he gave me a ride into town, I ditched him." He obviously didn't think that Blake deserved to be reassured about that. "It doesn't matter now, but I should have said something, told you how I felt instead of trying to get into your pants like my life depended on it. I got carried away. I was high and horny, and I wanted you more than anything. Just like I do now," Reese said as if it was the most natural thing to speak your mind like that.

Blake was a little stunned to hear him say it. "I figured I'd have to crawl back to you on my hands and knees."

"Just knees," Reese said in a husky whisper, and Blake dropped to his knees like he had been commanded.

Taking a step closer, Reese reached out to him and touched his face. It started with just his knuckles grazing Blake's cheekbone. Going around his jaw, Reese's hand pushed his face up then caressed the other side, catching on Blake's stubble. That light touch was a really good way to drive him crazy. Blake shuddered inwardly. He needed so much more.

"I want you more than anything. More than I want to breathe," Blake told him.

"You want me so much but you haven't made a move on me?" Reese said, looking down at him where he still kneeled.

"You noticed. That's because I have to prove myself to you – that I'm a good guy, that you can trust me and count on me." Blake knew it was a tall order after he failed him so badly.

"You do," Reese confirmed. "I've been without you for too long. Right now I don't need proof. I need you."

"Me too, but I want you to know how much you mean to me," Blake told him.

Reese leaned down. He stopped with his mouth so close to Blake's, like he was daring him to go for it. But when Blake looked up from his enticing, slightly parted mouth to his eyes, he saw that Reese's eyes were closed. Blake was afraid to breathe until Reese finally moved and made contact. It was nothing like the kiss that morning. This time his lips were feathery, hesitant like he was afraid that what happened years ago would happen again. Even so, the light touch of Reese's mouth carried such power.

Blake was blind to everything as electricity burst through him. A white-hot current ran down his spine when Reese's mouth glided over his too softly. As Reese pressed in, the shape of his lips was imprinted on Blake's. Blake memorized the curve, the lush, silky feel of them.

He didn't move. He didn't dare to disturb this perfect moment. It was like a man dying of thirst letting water touch his lips but not drinking. Breaking the tension, Reese's tongue licked Blake's lower lip. He opened his mouth to pull Reese in for a deeper kiss. Reese wouldn't let him.

Drawing back whenever Blake grew too hungry for him, he kept the kiss in constant slow motion, only letting Blake touch the surface of what it could be, how hot it could be between them. While Reese played him and tortured him gently, Blake couldn't get enough of him. The sliding of Reese's lips and tongue were like a drug. Sucking on the tip of his tongue, Blake felt like his heart would burst. The need inside him just kept building and building like it was limitless.

Suddenly Blake felt Reese take hold of the back of his head and kiss him deeper. His tongue swiped over Blake's, flicked and twirled. Just as suddenly Reese let go and stood straight, panting.

"Suck me off. I need you," he said breathing hard.

Blake didn't say anything. He just pulled Reese closer. Feeling his leg muscles lean and hard under his hands, Blake looked up at Reese. His eyes were hooded, needy. Blake knew he must look something like that too, as if kissing had made him drunk on Reese. But Reese looked more in control than Blake felt. He was wild for

Reese, ready to devour him.

Kneeling in front of him, Blake ran his hands up the back of his legs and over his ass. Wrapped around Reese's body, he just held on and looked up at him, worshiping him, wanting him. He heard Reese call his name, and he hurriedly unbuttoned his fly, overcome with the need to satisfy him.

His whole being yearned to make Reese feel good, but he didn't want to rush. At first he didn't take hold of Reese's cock, just stared. Freed from his jeans, his cock was long, hard and beautiful. Blake let it brush against his cheek, feeling its heat and steely hardness. He turned his head so the shaft would glide over his lips and then opened his mouth to take it inside.

Letting the cock slide deep into his mouth, he pushed his hand up under Reese's t-shirt. Blake watched his eyelids flutter as his head fell back. His fingers raked Blake's arms. As he moaned, the sound shook his chest. Under his outstretched hand, Blake could feel every sigh, every breath and every heartbeat. He loved all the signs that Reese wanted him.

While Blake sucked, he was euphoric from taking Reese inside him. The taste and feel of his cock rushed through him, taking over his whole body. But he couldn't lose himself to that feeling. He needed to please Reese. His moans told Blake he was doing just that. Reese swayed but Blake held him steady.

Reese's fingers tangled in his hair as he panted. When Blake picked up the pace, Reese looked down at him. His eyes gained a terrible focus. Blake felt as if he existed only in his gaze. Reese caressed his face as Blake moved over his cock and groped his ass. Reese's eyes were locked on his, burning into him.

Then Reese stiffened and came with a wordless cry. Caught by surprise, Blake struggled to swallow. The sight of Reese coming was a gift, a blessing he didn't deserve. His muscles relaxing with one final shudder, Reese sighed Blake's name as he came down. Blake licked up every last drop of his come.

Still breathing hard, Reese cupped his jaw and brought Blake's face up for a kiss. Then he dropped to his knees in front of Blake. As they kneeled together, Reese was so bright eyed and beautiful, Blake had to kiss him again. He plunged deep, dying to be one with him.

Blake wanted to keep kissing him forever, but Reese had other plans. He pulled back.

"Sit on the bed," he told him.

Blake obeyed, and Reese came over to kneel between his legs.

"I've been dreaming about this," he said to Blake in a breathy whisper as his hands got busy undoing Blake's fly.

Reese's own jeans were still open, revealing his cock already starting to get hard again. Finding it irresistible, Blake reached for it, but Reese swatted his hand away.

"You will not distract me," Reese warned him.

Blake smiled and Reese smiled at him too. Just as Blake almost said I love you, Reese took hold of his cock. Blake was speechless. All he knew was the warmth of Reese's skin and the pressure of his grip. His whole being was in the palm of Reese's hand.

Blake moaned and Reese looked up at him. He leaned down until his mouth was close to the tip but not touching it. His tongue flicked out and played over the slit. Blake grunted. Licking his lower lip, Reese held on to the base of Blake's cock. He lapped at his balls then slowly worked his way to the head while maintaining eye contact. He kept that up for a while driving Blake crazy by running his wet, teasing tongue over his cock. Finally, with a rapturous expression, Reese took the head in his mouth and sucked on it.

Blake willed himself not to come. He was both relieved and disappointed when Reese eased off, but not for long. He let Blake's cock slide inch by inch between his lips. Reese's wonderful mouth moved over him slowly. Like that kiss, the feeling Reese gave him was exquisite and excruciating. The contact was there but not the pressure or the speed he needed to come. Blake didn't move or rush him even as he ached for release.

In a way Blake was happy to wait, to be inside Reese's hot mouth forever. He felt an intense connection to Reese as he looked up at him with a promise to make him suffer before he let him come.

In a daze of pleasure and need, Blake felt like the torturous blowjob would never end. Pleasure built inside him until it was unbearable, and he was calling Reese's name in a hoarse, begging voice. He would never get to come. Reese would just keep him on the knife's edge of coming forever and make him love it.

Then Reese sped up. He sucked a little harder and a little faster at each pull. Soon he was working his cock furiously with muscles knotted just as Blake's were. His whole body was stiff with the need to come. He wanted to warn Reese he was coming, but only a strangled cry escaped him. His head thrown back, Blake yelled out like a creature in pain.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Reese giving him a look of satisfaction and ownership and licking up the last of his come. That look clearly said now you're mine. Blake didn't think he could tear his eyes away from Reese, but he dropped back on the bed anyway. He was boneless and spent. That wasn't a blowjob. That was unreal.

Breathing hard, he felt Reese crawl over him. His hard cock brushed Blake's thigh. He reached for it and this time Reese let him. He lay on the bed, and Blake sucked him off again. He could do it over and over again forever. Gritting his teeth and rising off the bed, Reese was ready to come. Arching to thrust deep inside Blake, Reese came with a long moan. He collapsed on the bed, and Blake slumped over his legs.

"Hey," Reese said to get his attention. Then he opened his arms, inviting Blake into his embrace. Blake settled himself against him. He was so unbelievably happy. As he started to doze off, he listened to a voice inside him that begged him to make it last, make this feeling last.

Hours later, Blake was only half asleep when he felt Reese shudder then tense in his arms. He made desperate sounds of fear and pain. His cries were guttural and alien to Blake like Reese's true voice was trapped in his chest along with his breath.

"Breathe," Blake begged him while Reese struggled and fought him. His hands clawed and beat at Blake as he held him and said his name, trying to call him back to reality.

Reese wore a faraway, glassy look in his eyes. He seemed too far to reach, and Blake squeezed him tighter to bring him back. Reese felt tense as steel in his arms, but also breakable. Still, Blake would rather crush him in his embrace than lose him.

When he felt Reese start to relax and breathe normally, Blake loosened his hold on him. He looked at him and saw him smile.

"Are you OK?" he asked, surprised.

"It's all good as long as you're here," Reese told him.

This time he didn't just seem tranquil as he gazed at Blake like after the last nightmare. There was a light in his eyes. Blake leaned down and kissed him gently. He gave Reese small kisses until he felt him start to fall asleep.

At first, Blake was afraid to take a breath or move until he was sure Reese was sound asleep. Such a terrible nightmare, and he was sleeping so peacefully now. His strength made Blake want to laugh and cry. Reese shouldn't have to be so strong, but he was. In the face of everything he had to live through, he had ten times the courage Blake did.

Not his father beating him, or anything that had happened to him since then, had put out the fire inside him that Blake had seen when he first met him. It had scared Blake then, but now it amazed him and made him love Reese even more. From now on, he wanted Reese to know only love. He wanted to shield and protect him.

Late into the morning, Blake couldn't resist the temptation of Reese pressed against him. His warm body was relaxed in sleep while Blake lay there hot, tense and hard as a rock. Moving his hands over him, Blake tried to wake him gently. Reese murmured something incomprehensible, and shoved Blake away, determined to stay asleep.

Blake groaned as he left him alone and started to get out of bed. But suddenly Reese was on him, demanding to know where he thought he was going. Groping and kissing him, Reese grabbed hold of Blake's hard cock still trapped in his boxers.

"So you're awake," Blake said as Reese shoved him down on the bed.

He moved down Blake's body, pushing up the t-shirt he slept in and kissing his way to his cock. Blake trailed his hands over Reese's shoulders up to his neck, needing to feel him and to hold on and anchor himself. Looking up at him, Reese sucked with a sure, steady movement like he wanted to drain him dry in record time.

Once he got what he was after, Reese untangled himself from Blake roughly and stalked into the bathroom. As he went, he let his

already unbuttoned jeans drop off his hips along with his boxers. Blake groaned and watched his ass as he went.

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Reese looked at himself in the bathroom mirror as if he was looking for some mark last night might have left on him. There was that smile that sneaked onto his face until Reese chased it away with a stern glare. His head was full of Blake, of every moment of being with him. But that wasn't all.

Another nightmare cut his night in two – before and after. If only Blake didn't have to suffer through it along with him. Reese saw so much pain in his eyes, but it also gave him so much comfort to wake up to Blake and see his face even if it was worried and anguished. Blake was proof that the nightmare wasn't real, that he was safe.

At the same time Reese hated feeling weak. He was under attack from his own memories. In sleep, he was helpless, afraid of ghosts of the past. It made him angry that once again brutal men had power over him even if it was only in his dreams. What bothered him most was that he wanted to show Blake his strength, not his weakness.

Physically, Blake was stronger, more muscular than the high school boy Reese remembered. But his power wasn't in his body. It was in the way he made Reese feel. Reese didn't fool himself that he was strong in the face of his desire for Blake. That had been disproved every time he failed to leave town. And long before that when he held on to his love for Blake through the hardest times of his life. When he felt like a piece of meat being skewered, he would reach for Blake and the memory of the closeness that developed so quickly between them.

Even if Blake had failed him, he was still Blake – the only guy Reese saw on his first day at Meadowview High. The moment Reese set eyes on him, it was like the universe had singled him out. "This one is for you." Seeing Blake scowling, unfriendly, confused by being stared at, Reese knew his life might be shit but there was someone set aside just for him. Out of all the people in the world, he was given one – one person, one good thing, and Blake couldn't do anything to make Reese stop believing that he was the one meant for

him.

Chapter 14

Lying in bed that night, Finn was restless. Nando's touch was still fresh on his body. It made him hot even after he kicked the sheets and covers off. But it was unprecedented. Nando came to see him. All by itself that thought could have kept him up all night. The feeling of Nando's big, hard body grinding into him, his hand teasing his hole replayed over and over in his mind and on every inch of him.

That's why he got out of bed the next morning cursing Nando's name. Finn was a zombie. Knowing the reason, all through breakfast Dee was shooting slut-shaming glares his way. She knew who was responsible for Finn looking so wiped.

Finn sleepwalked through classes and focused on the plans for later. After school that day, he and Dee were going to Blake's motel. It wasn't just to hang out. They had a mission.

"How come Blake doesn't resent us?" Dee asked as they got out of the car in the motel parking lot.

"Maybe he does," Finn said with a shrug, slamming his door shut.

"He isn't nice enough to hide it. If he resented us, we'd know," Dee asserted.

Finn couldn't disagree. He didn't notice any kind of bad feeling from Blake, but maybe he had been too distracted by looking for and then finding Reese to bother begrudging them a life he didn't get to have. To Finn, his own relationship with his father was nothing to envy, but it was more than Blake had. All Blake had was Reese. That's why he was so obsessed with him.

Going up the stairs to his motel room, Finn and Dee saw that they weren't the first in line to get in. Two scary looking girls in black were already waiting in front of room 212.

Blake opened the door to them. "You still dress like this," Blake said.

"And you're still the whitest piece if white bread that ever got baked," the scarier of the two girls shot back.

"Let me guess why you're here," Blake said to both girls just as

Reese appeared next to him.

"There you are! We were just going to torture white bread into telling us where you were," the blond goth chick said cheerfully as she gave Reese a hug.

"We're taking him with us," the brunette said to Blake as she grabbed hold of Reese's arm roughly.

"Maybe you shouldn't be making yourself conspicuous," Blake said to Reese while looking pointedly at the two girls, their makeup and their outfits.

"We'll keep him safe," the brunette said while putting Reese in a friendly headlock. "But first he has to answer for sneaking into town and not coming to see us."

"How did you know he was here, I mean at this motel?" Blake asked them with an edge to his voice.

"We didn't. That's why we were going to torture you," the blonde said.

"How did you know I was here?" Blake asked.

"Goth mafia knows everything," Reese told him. "You were chatting with Pietro, and he's Simone's cousin."

"Of course he is," Blake grumbled.

"Who are the prep school nerds?" the brunette asked, seeing Finn and Dee watching the spectacle.

He and Dee looked down at their school uniforms.

"My brother and sister, Finn and Dee Dee," Blake introduced them. "This is Patty and Simone. They're here to kidnap Reese."

"Just Reese, right?" Dee asked him. "Because we are here to kidnap you."

"We have no use for him." Patty pointed a thumb at Blake without bothering to look at him. Finn did get an appraising once over from the girls until Blake told them not to even think about it.

"That would be an interesting sandwich," Finn said as the girls left with Reese between them. Finn was imagining it was him. Reese could stay or go, either way.

Blake groaned. "They're all talk. I think." For the first time, he turned to Finn and Dee and gave them his full attention. When Reese was around, it was like they didn't even exist. "Why are you kidnapping me?" he wanted to know.

"Mom was all, 'Where have you been? What have you been doing?' So we had to spill some of the beans," Dee said apologetically. "Now she wants to meet you."

"Oh, God," Blake said, horrified.

"Yeah, yeah. You have our sympathy. Now move it," Finn said.

Blake grumbled, but he came along. Only his body was with them though. The whole way over to their house, Blake was preoccupied. Finn knew who was on his mind, but neither he or Dee could get him to talk about Reese. He was in a Reese haze, brooding over him, blind and deaf to everything else.

Stuck in the back seat while Dee did a bad impression of driving, Finn caught her eye in the rear view mirror. He wondered if Reese were to hurt Blake, would he have the same attitude Dee had toward Nando. Reese was cute, but Finn could definitely get his hate on if he needed to on Blake's behalf.

But he had a feeling that in this scenario, Reese wasn't Nando. He had already noticed the guilty look Blake sometimes wore around his boyfriend. Maybe Reese needed someone to be mad at Blake on his behalf. It made Finn realize he was lucky to have Dee. What a strange and alien thought. He vowed to keep it to himself at all costs. But he had Blake too now. Even with Dad being gone, Finn was so far from alone. He wasn't Reese or Blake. He didn't need Nando the way the two of them needed each other, but he fell hard for him anyway. With no real need, Finn was intensely greedy for him. He just hoped he could handle things with Nando whichever way they might go.

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Dee Dee was driving, and she saved Blake the front seat, not that Finn gave it up without a fight. Blake would have given it to him. He wasn't a hundred percent there anyway. Still wrapped up in thoughts of Reese, he couldn't let go of what happened between them. Blake wished they could have spent all day together, but he did owe it to Finn and Dee Dee to go and meet their mother.

The day was sunny, putting an extra glow on the already shiny parts of Meadowview. With Dee Dee behind the wheel, Finn spent

the whole ride criticizing her driving. As far as Blake could see, her driving was fine. Still, Finn never let up on her, but she had obviously built up an immunity from a lifetime of exposure.

Blake envied the two of them. They weren't tight just because they were twins. They were tight because they shared everything. It made him wonder what their mother was like. He was sure of one thing – she had to be the complete opposite of his own.

Though he didn't look forward to meeting the twins' mother, Blake was glad to have a distraction. It would keep him from obsessing about Reese and wondering what Patty and Simone were doing to him. When it came to Reese, his imagination was in overdrive. He could only imagine the most explicit scenarios, but they were probably just having a late lunch.

Blake thought back to watching Reese as he slept after another restless night. Right before Patty and Simone arrived, Blake had asked him, "Do you ever sleep well?"

"Last night and the night before were the best night's sleep I ever had," Reese told him. As he said that, his eyes had the same dreamy, soft look Blake had seen both times when Reese woke up from his nightmare and finally recognized him. That's when the panicked look melted away, and Reese looked content and at peace. He touched Blake's face and went back to sleep in Blake's arms.

His nightmares were painful to witness. They hurt Blake deep inside and made him even more protective of Reese. When Patty and Simone came for him, Blake didn't want to let him go. But after everything, he was hardly in a position to take over Reese's life and tell him what to do.

A bump in the road and Finn heckling Dee Dee's driving brought him out of his thoughts. Blake looked around to try and figure out where they were. Lush greenery served as a backdrop to a riot of flowers. Blake realized that the twins' house must be in Elway Gardens.

The small community was appropriately named. Every house was surrounded by trees and plants that allowed only a glimpse of a window or a door and maybe a little bit of a roof. Spring was in full bloom in window boxes and flower beds. Every house they passed

was nestled in its own peaceful, secluded space.

The front yard where they stopped was only peaceful until the twins barged through a garden gate and up the path to their house. Under the big trees in the front yard, Blake could see a white bench and a small outdoor table with four chairs. The porch was long with two sets of French doors on either end.

Sprawling and well shaded under giant trees, it was a modest house by Meadowview standards. Announcing themselves loudly, Finn and Dee Dee went through the front door. Going in, Blake saw a living room decorated in a casual, feminine style. He hardly had time to look at anything else as the twins hustled him through the house while shouting for their mother.

"He's here! We got him! He's here!" Dee Dee yelled like Blake was their prize catch.

"I haven't gone deaf, but I might if you keep shouting like that," their mother told them as she came out to meet them.

She was pretty and simply but impeccably dressed. What struck Blake was how the twins went over to hug her. She let them hang all over her while she gave Blake an uncertain smile.

"Hello, Mrs... I mean..." Blake said, flustered, not sure how to address her.

"Yu Lin will be fine," she told him with a kind smile. "And I go by Huen now."

"Yeah, she ditched the old man's last name too," Finn said.

"I've heard a lot about you," Yu Lin said to Blake with a guarded look on her face.

"Now we eat?" Finn said before his mother could elaborate.

Blake wondered if he interrupted her deliberately.

"Yes. Let's find something to feed you," Yu Lin said and led them to the kitchen.

The white kitchen had a breakfast nook on one end with a set of French doors leading out into the garden. Herbs were tied with string and hanging in bunches under the kitchen cabinets to dry. They gave the kitchen a sharp, green scent.

"Grandma did that," Dee Dee said. "She planted an herb garden in the back, and if we forget to water it, she yells at us."

"She works hard and has no patience for people who don't," Yu Lin

said, pointedly looking at each of her children in turn.

"Don't you go and turn into her," Finn warned her while opening the fridge door wide.

"I want to make my specialty for Blake. Grilled cheese with pesto and ham," Dee Dee piped up and went over to stick her head in the refrigerator. After a little poking around, she exclaimed unhappily. "Oh, no. We don't have any cheese. Mom!" she complained seeing that her menu plan was ruined.

"You know where the store is, honey," her mother told her.

"That means I'm up with my famous warmed up pizza and egg drop soup?" Finn said as he saw what was in the fridge. He held up a plastic container with soup. "Grandma was here?"

"She dropped it off before going on her meals on wheels deliveries," his mother said.

"We'll warm up the pizza. And we can make a salad." Dee Dee held up a bag of lettuce.

She and Finn bustled around the kitchen, getting in each other's way and talking over each other. Their mother left the food to the kids.

Inviting Blake to come with her, she took him into what looked like a study. A fat, white cat was already in there, sunning itself on an ottoman that was set up under one window. The cat turned its head and squinted at them then went back to looking out the window.

"That's Polly," Yu Lin said. "We love her. She tolerates us."

Blake checked out the room. Bookshelves wrapped around stopping only when they hit the two windows. One window let in plenty of light while the other window was well shaded. A desk loaded down with papers faced the corner between the windows.

Yu Lin pointed to the two sides of the room. "Sun or shade?"

There was a plush armchair on each end of the room and a love seat facing them. Blake took the loveseat. He had already figured out that she wanted to have a private chat with him.

"The twins were so excited to finally meet you. And I have to admit, I was curious as well," she said while she made herself comfortable in the armchair on the sunny side.

"And worried," Blake added. Though she wasn't unwelcoming, he

could tell she was uneasy about him.

"Well, yes," she admitted. The look in her eyes asked him to understand a mother's concern. "I don't even know where they've been going or what they've been up to since you became the center of their world."

"I'm a novelty. It will wear off," Blake predicted.

"Probably. But you will still be their brother." She smiled then shook her head. "Sorry. Finn and Dee Dee said they recognized you because you looked so much like Jim, the young Jim anyway. They were right. It's a little unsettling."

Blake ducked his head, feeling ashamed of his resemblance to his father. After the way she and her kids welcomed him into their house, he should have been ashamed for skulking around and sneaking away when he saw them at the funeral. "I'm sorry. I should have come to you before now or at the funeral, and introduced myself."

"Don't worry about that. All of us had a lot on our minds. You're here now. That's what matters." She smiled at him more warmly than before. "The kids would be having a much harder time of it if it wasn't for you."

"Were they close to him?" Blake asked hesitantly. He wasn't sure how much he wanted to know about that.

"Not really. They spent more time with their father after he got sick than ever before. He kept us all at a distance. When I first met him, he was so closed off. I thought he just needed some love and patience. But it turned out I didn't have enough of either." She smiled sadly and maybe a little bitterly.

"I'm sure he wasn't easy to live with," Blake said. He was surprised that she was so willing to talk about her ex husband like that. He wondered if she did it for his sake.

"Jim was so magnetic. I met him at a college fundraising banquet and fell for him hard. But being his wife, that was another thing. He was so mistrustful, paranoid even. I thought I could prove myself to him, and he would learn to trust me. But I got tired of proving myself. Finn was just starting to get rebellious. I didn't think Jim would be able to deal with him. Even Dee Dee has a stubborn streak. I thought they would be better off with more freedom. And Finn

being bi – Jim was never going to accept that," she said with a shake of her head. "Finn told me you are gay. That was a nice surprise."

Blake found himself smiling at her words. It seemed like she forgot her earlier mistrust of him. She was much more refined than Finn and Dee Dee, but she was a lot like her kids. She didn't let anything bad keep its hold on her for long. No wonder she couldn't stay married to Jim Monroe.

"I know you must have a lot of mixed feelings about your father," she said with a look of understanding. "I wish I could tell you something about him that could help you come to terms with him. If you are wondering how your father felt about you, I don't know. He refused to speak about you or your mother."

"His actions tell me everything I need to know," Blake told her.

"Try not to dwell on it," she said, echoing his thoughts. "You're your own man now. Just accept you feelings for what they are. Even if you don't miss your actual father, you can still miss the idea of him."

"You mean I miss the father I never had?"

She nodded. Yu Lin was so warm and had a confident but calm energy. As he sat with her, feeling at ease in her company, Blake couldn't help but compare her to his own mother.

His mother was always restless and on edge. Pacing their rundown house like a trapped animal, she ceaselessly seemed to be grasping for something just out of reach. Since he was little, being around her had always made Blake nervous. After so many years, it was impossible for him to imagine living with a mother who didn't fly into a rage, throw things and constantly scream about money and all the men who refused to give it to her.

While Blake was lost in unpleasant thoughts, the twins started yelling, calling him to come eat. Their mother didn't join them. Blake saw her settle into her armchair with a book.

On the way to the kitchen, Blake spotted pictures of the twins with their father on a side table. They startled him. Jim Monroe looked serious in all of them while the kids smiled next to him. In one photo, little Finn and Dee Dee were each holding one of their father's hands.

Blake closed his eyes as a sense memory overtook him. For a moment, he could remember vividly what it was like to hold his father's hand, how his small hand fit in his father's big one. He could feel the exact pressure of his father's fingers and the rougher texture of his skin. He opened his eyes, feeling unbearably sad. That's when he noticed Dee Dee standing next to him silently, a worried look on her face. Blake turned to her to reassure her, but before he could say anything, she hugged him.

As she threw her arms around his neck, she said, "It's OK to be sad, even if he was a bastard to you."

She stepped back and straightened her glasses which had gone crooked from hugging him.

"You're a good sister," Blake told her. His voice was unexpectedly hoarse.

"She's not bad," Finn said as he joined them and put his arm over Blake's shoulder.

Just as they were going in to eat, Blake got a call. It was Gabby, Roberto's sister, and she was whispering. At first Blake couldn't make out what she was saying. He did catch Reese's name and his heart started beating fast.

"A man with an eye patch is here looking for Reese. I'm hiding in the store room," Gabby said.

Blake realized that she was at the bodega. "Call the cops right now," he told her urgently.

"He isn't doing anything," she said. "Just looking around. I have the baseball bat ready if he tries anything."

"If he doesn't leave soon, call the police. Tell them there's a man in the store acting suspicious. I'll be right over there," Blake told her.

She said OK then hung up.

Blake started to rush out. Then he remembered that the twins drove him there.

"What's going on?" Finn asked.

"The one eyed man is at the bodega. Let me borrow the car," Blake said.

"We'll drive you," Dee Dee said.

"Fuck! No!" Blake snapped.

"Do you have time to argue?" Finn asked him.

"I have time to tell your mother to keep you home," Blake threatened.

"And find the car keys?" Dee Dee asked.

"Fine. I'm driving," Blake said. All he could hope for was to keep them in the car.

Chapter 15

When they got to Collins Street, Blake saw a police car parked in front of the bodega. He parked across the street but a few yards back. Then he waited and watched. After a little while, two uniformed cops came out with the one eyed man between them.

Blake took a long hateful look at that man. Except for his eye patch, he seemed ordinary. He was balding with a shaved head, the hair just starting to grow out. His nondescript features gave no clue about what kind of scum he was. Though fairly short, he had a stocky, strong looking body. Blake wondered if he built it up in prison.

He was hoping that's where he was headed again, but then he saw the one eyed man walk away from the two cops. Blake wished they had found some reason to arrest him, but they were just letting him go.

Fuming, Blake watched the man get into his car, an old white Buick. He memorized his license plate as the car pulled away from the curb and drove off.

"Aren't we going to follow him?" Dee Dee asked in alarm as the one eyed man disappeared down the street.

"No," Blake said curtly. He would follow if Finn and Dee Dee weren't in the car with him. He got out and went into the bodega.

"Are you OK?" Blake asked Manuela.

She nodded just as Gabby came out from the back with a baseball bat in hand and went over to hug her mother. She must have been hiding even after the cops got there.

"I was restocking, and I heard the guy ask about Reese, and I knew not to come out," Gabby said. "Mama says I'm a bad liar."

"You are," her mother confirmed.

"When Mama didn't tell him anything, he just hung around like he had nothing better to do," Gabby said.

"Did he ask for you or Roberto?" Blake asked her.

"No. He never said anything about us. He described Reese and asked if Mama had seen him. He said he was Reese's uncle."

"Gross," Blake said, disgusted by that lie. Then he wondered,

"Why didn't you call Reese?"

"I wasn't sure if he was still in town. If he was, he would get all protective and rush over here. I wanted to keep him away," Gabby explained. "I needed someone with a cool head."

"Is that why you didn't call Roberto?"

"Pretty much," Gabby admitted.

Blake's main worry was that Randal Mayes might come back there. Manuela assured him that she would get the word out on Collins Street about the one eyed man. That way he wouldn't be able to bother her again without the cops being called on him right away. As an added precaution, Roberto would be sticking around more.

Blake left the bodega with Mayes visit weighing on his mind. He had come too close to his target by looking for Reese there. Damn. Reese had been right to want to leave town.

In a state of tension and worry, Blake had to call Reese to make sure he was OK. He was still with Patty and Simone. Blake was relieved to hear his voice. He didn't give him all the details though, just told him to go back to the motel.

"Where to now?" Finn asked after Blake got off the phone and they all headed to the car.

"First to the motel then you two are going home," Blake told them.

"But we didn't feed you," Dee Dee complained.

"Let's go somewhere and eat," Finn said.

"You two can go, but I need to go talk to Reese."

"We can all go then," Dee Dee said.

"Guys, you've horned in enough," Blake told them since they had forced him to take them to Manuela's.

"He wants alone time with Reese," Finn said and made a kissyface.

"If that will get you to go home, then yes," Blake confirmed.

He had the kids drop him off at the motel. As they drove away, he waved then went up to the room to wait for Reese. He didn't go in though. The wind was picking up, bringing with it a damp cold that promised rain. Blake could see dark clouds being blown in over the rooftops as he stood on the walkway in front of his motel room. He

just couldn't be cooped up inside that small room. He was too impatient to see Reese.

It wasn't long before Patty and Simone drove into the parking lot and Reese got out of the back seat. Seeing Blake where he was waiting, elbows against the railing, Reese stared up at him.

When he came up, Reese was a little chilled from the wind. Blake hugged him, wanting to warm him up and feel him in his arms as proof that he was OK. Reese grunted in surprise then pulled him even closer. Now that he was holding him, Blake had trouble letting go. He was so happy Reese was there.

Once they got inside the room, Blake talked to him about Mayes' visit to the bodega. Reese had already been on the phone with Gabby and Roberto. He was worried about the two of them and their mom, but Blake's top priority was Reese.

"There's one way to keep everyone safe, you most of all. We need to leave town," Blake told him.

"Both of us together?" Reese asked. His worried frown was gone. He narrowed his eyes while an uncertain smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

"Yes, if you want," Blake said. He sounded a lot less sure of himself now that Reese's eyes were on him. He kind of felt hot and uncomfortable as well as afraid that Reese might not want to go away with him.

"So we're finally going to run away together," Reese said ruefully.

"I guess so," Blake looked down, reminded of how Reese had to go off on his own.

"Don’t get shy now," Reese told him, stepping closer. Taking Blake's chin in his hand, he tilted his head up.

Forced to face him, Blake said, "I know we have unfinished business."

"Did you want to deal with it on the road?" Reese asked.

"No. I just don't know how to start. I have a lot to make up for. You had it so rough, and I only added to your pain," Blake told him.

Reese disagreed with a shake of his head. Stepping away from Blake, he paced.

"That's not true. You were the bandage for all my wounds. I would forget everything that was going on at home when I was with you. I

would get so lost in you." Reese looked at him and his eyes filled with pain as he continued. "And then that last year, you wouldn't even acknowledge that I existed, like I was transparent, like I was nothing. I had no reason to stick around. I ran. But on the street, I was invisible to everyone except the men who wanted to fuck me."

"Sorry I failed you," Blake said, his voice coming out hoarse, choked off with sorrow and regret.

"Just don't do it again," Reese said simply. Strangely, he didn't look mad when he said that. "But are you really sure you want to go off with me this time? If it's only because you feel guilty for turning your back on me..."

Blake didn't let him finish. "I do feel guilty, but that's not why. I need you in my life. I can't be happy without you. I wasted years when I could have been with you. Even worse, I wasn't there when you needed me."

"I did OK," Reese said. He never did want to admit how much help he needed.

"So you don't need me?" Blake asked pointedly.

"I need you more than I could say." The look in Reese's eyes left no doubt that he meant he needed Blake in his heart.

"I don't deserve you," Blake whispered.

"What does deserving have to do with it?" Reese said with a teasing look in his eyes.

Good thing he felt that way or Blake wouldn't stand a chance. He needed to be with Reese more than anything. It was a need he felt down to his bones. He would go anywhere to be with him. But all he had to do was take one step to hold Reese in his arms. As Reese sighed against his shoulder, Blake closed his eyes with relief. Wherever they went, they would be together.

Blake was ready to abandon school, his job, his apartment, everything to be with Reese. When he asked Reese where he wanted to go, Reese simply said, "With you." As Blake stared at him in wonder, Reese added, "I don't care where we go. I already gave up what little I had to be able to see you. I half expected you might reject me again. I didn't care."

"Have I mentioned just how much I don't deserve you?" Blake said.

"Yes, and I'm sick of hearing it. You need to go back to school. That's where we'll go," Reese decided. He was making this way too easy on Blake.

It was weird, but the hard part might be leaving that motel room. Blake looked over at the bed. It wasn't just a motel bed any more. It was the bed he and Reese shared.

"We should pack up and go," Blake said to make himself move. He got his duffel bag and started stuffing his things in it.

"Right this minute? You can't leave like that. You just found your brother and sister," Reese told him and took a rolled up t-shirt out of his hand.

"They aren't going anywhere," Blake said. He did hate to leave them so soon, but he was planning to go back to school in a few days anyway.

"You need more time with them," Reese said.

"I'll keep in touch. Right now I need to get you away from here."

"You have to tell them you're leaving," Reese insisted.

"I'll call them."

"Blake, how did you like it when I left town without saying goodbye? Do you really want to do that to them?" Reese asked him.

That certainly hit home. Blake was silent. He remembered the gut wrenching feeling very well. He felt lost, abandoned, and scared of what might happen to Reese. God help him, he even felt rejected.

"OK. We can stop by their house and leave from there," Blake conceded.

"You're still planning to leave right away?"

"Why not?" Blake asked. He didn't understand Reese's reluctance to leave.

"We can stay one more night."

"Too many people know you're here."

"One more night. Now lets go tell your brother and sister we're leaving in the morning."

"OK." Blake looked back at the bed, glad they were coming back to it. He wondered if Reese felt the same way and that's why he wanted to stay a little longer.

Chapter 16

The two of them drove over to Elway Gardens to tell Finn and Dee Dee that they planned to leave the next day. When they arrived in front of their house, it was only just starting to rain. The rain was sparse, and the low sun shone through it, even throwing a small rainbow among the treetops.

When Finn opened the door to them, he and Dee Dee were very surprised to see Blake again so soon. They didn't like hearing the reason.

"You can't leave," Dee Dee said in alarm. "It's too soon."

Finn echoed her disappointment. "Not cool. We haven't finished training you to be our big brother."

When Yu Lin joined them to see why her kids were making such a fuss, Blake took the opportunity to introduce Reese to her. She smiled at him then at Blake like she approved.

"We were going to ask you to come over for dinner," Dee Dee said with a pout. "You too," she said turning to Reese.

"It was going to be tomorrow, but we can make it tonight. You can stay that long," Finn said and frowned threateningly at Blake then at Reese just in case they were thinking of refusing.

"That should be OK," Reese decided before Blake could answer.

Just as well since Blake couldn't bring himself to say no to them. He nodded in agreement.

"It won't be anything fancy just what we can throw together," Yu Lin said.

"Why are we throwing? We can order in," Finn said.

"Dee Dee wanted to make a homemade dinner for Blake," his mother explained.

But Dee Dee now agreed with Finn. "There's no time. I don't want to cook and do dishes when they're leaving tomorrow. I want us to hang out."

"OK. I'll take care of it. I'll order something from Amilia's," Yu Lin said indulgently. As she got on her phone, the twins clustered around her making menu demands.

That allowed Blake a minute with Reese out of earshot.

"Are you really OK with staying for dinner?" Blake asked him.

"I don’t mind a taste of a normal life," Reese said as he looked around.

"I don’t know about normal, but they are all nice," Blake said.

"If it wasn't for your dad, you could have known them all along," Reese said.

"I can't put it all on him. They went looking for me when they were fourteen. I had years to come see them, but I never did."

"Typical," Reese said with a shake of his head. "You really do need to be hunted down like an animal by the people in your life."

Blake groaned. He couldn't deny the truth of that.

When Dee Dee and Finn came over to join the two of them, they told him that there was one more guest for dinner.

"Grandma Xin Qian is coming over," Dee Dee said. Her expression was caught somewhere between eager and cautious.

"Good luck, man. You'll need it," Finn said. His expression wasn't ambiguous. It clearly said, "You are dead meat."

The reason for his attitude arrived just as Yu Lin and the kids were done setting up the table with takeout served in nice dishes. The twins' grandmother was very businesslike as she came in. She looked like she was there to do a surprise inspection not have dinner. At odds with her attitude, she was dressed like a hippy in a long, tie-died skirt and an embroidered shirt. Her hair was graying, cut straight at chin level.

After taking in everything, her eyes settled on Blake as he was introduced to her. She looked him up and down then she stepped closer. With her chin raised, she looked hard at his face.

"You look too much like your father for my liking," she said.

"Mom!" Yu Lin said, sounding kind of like Dee Dee. She looked ready to apologize to Blake for her outspoken mother.

"It's OK. I agree," Blake reassured Yu Lin and smiled at the twins' grandmother. "It wasn't my choice."

"Just make sure it's only skin deep," Xin Qian said.

"Mom, please don't lecture him," Yu Lin told her.

The look on Xin Qian's face clearly said that she would do as she pleased. She turned back to Blake with a brighter look in her eyes.

"I guess you're family," she said to him.

"I guess so," Blake said. He smiled but he was kind of close to crying too. It was weird how good it was to hear those words. Blake felt like he was officially being welcomed back into the family from which his father had exiled him. Reese must have known what he was feeling because he grinned at him. Having him there just made everything better.

They went to sit down, and the twins' grandmother made a toast. "To the next generation. May they live up to their potential."

"You are not supposed to use a toast to scold us," Finn objected.

His grandmother only shrugged. During dinner, Finn and Dee Dee dominated the conversation.

"Dee is a scardy cat. She didn't even want to come out of our mom," Finn said.

Dee Dee rolled her eyes and their mother cringed.

"It's true. I'm twelve minutes older than her," Finn said. "She made me go first, and she wouldn't come out till I gave the all clear."

"You probably just elbowed me out of the way so you could be first," Dee Dee told him.

Blake couldn't believe they were arguing about their birth. He had no first hand experience until now, but he had a feeling that, like old married people, siblings could argue about anything. Their mother and grandmother took it in stride while Reese seemed to be enjoying the show. He smiled at Blake like he was congratulating him on his newfound family.

When they were done with dinner, the twins cleared the table. Blake got up to help too. It seemed like a brotherly thing to do. Taking the dishes into the kitchen, he noticed a picture on the fridge of little Dee Dee hugging little Finn while he made a funny face at the camera. He had trouble reconciling that image of him with a Finn who was lusting after a closeted baseball player.

"That's us in first grade. I loved school so much," Dee Dee said. She was a nerd through and through.

"Except she was too shy, and some of the other kids thought they could pick on her. If I saw them, it was war. But I picked on her

more than anyone. It's a big brother's privilege. Don't you get any ideas," Finn said to Blake.

"I think I'm too old to pick on you," Blake claimed, though he could pick on Finn a little. He was kind of asking for it.

"You're never too old for that. I'll be picking on Dee until I'm old, gray and toothless," Finn asserted and turned on the water to rinse off the dishes.

Now that he couldn't hear, Dee Dee sidled up to Blake. "When we were little, Finn would beat up anyone for me. He got into so much trouble. But really I was just a big crybaby," Dee Dee whispered and grinned.

Looking around some more, Blake saw a faded kid's drawing that was hanging on the fridge. He noticed that Dee Dee had signed it, but one of the Dee's was crossed out.

"Your doing?" he asked Finn, who was drying his hands. "What's your problem with that other Dee."

Finn came over to look at the drawing. "It's superfluous. One Dee says it all. But when we were real little, I used to call her Dee Dee Dee or Dee Dee Dee Dee. And she would yell, 'Too many!' She was always a math nerd. So I decided to keep it simple and call her Dee."

"You could have just learned to count... to two!" Dee Dee told him.

"Thanks for helping with the dishes," Finn said to Blake. "You're picking up this brother thing pretty fast. But just so you know, I have high expectations for an older brother."

"I don't." Dee Dee looked at Finn as the reason. "I have very low expectations," she said as she continued to stare, leaning in toward Finn while he ignored her.

Then Finn pinched her nose.

"See! That's why," she said to Blake. "He's been pinching my nose since the day we were born."

"Really?" Blake said, thinking that she was exaggerating.

Finn laughed. "It's true. There's a picture of us as newborns, and I'm pinching her nose."

Finn and Dee Dee had been doing their thing forever, Blake realized. They had it down pat, but it was new to Blake. Even as he felt lucky to finally be in their lives, he envied them.

The three of them went back to the table. As they all sat together, talking and laughing, Blake couldn't shake a sense of urgency. After seeing Mayes and knowing he was still looking for Reese, he couldn't relax. Still he wanted to enjoy the short time he had to spend with his brother and sister. The thought made him choke up a little. He couldn't believe how quickly he had gotten into his role as their brother. Not that they left him any other choice, and he was glad about that. But then he had been their brother all along. He remembered hearing about them being born. Brimming over with excitement, he had been so eager to see them. But it wasn't good news to his mother.

"Twins! Twins!" his mother had screamed at him. "That's even less money for you."

At six, Blake didn't know what she was talking about. He didn't get an allowance. He just wondered when he would go and see them. He didn't know yet that his mother wanted him to hate them.

"They're going to steal everything from you," she would say to Blake. She still hoped she would be able to get to his father's money through him. "He'll never come around now." It had been more than a year since he exiled them, and he already had a new family.

Blake never would have imagined that they would be anything like Finn and Dee Dee. He looked over at them as they argued. He caught Reese's eye.

"Reading my mind?" Blake whispered to him.

"Just watching you being happy," Reese said and squeezed his hand.

Now that they were finished with dinner, Yu Lin realized they hadn't ordered dessert.

Dee Dee told her, "Don't worry about dessert, Mom. We'll take them for smoothies at Stoker's."

With that plan in mind, Finn, Dee Dee, Blake and Reese stepped outside the front door only to see that it was still raining.

"I guess we're taking the car," Finn said.

"To Stoker's? No. It's stopping," Dee Dee said and stuck out her hand to feel the rain.

They got comfortable on the bench and waited. As they sat on the

porch, rain drizzled, tapping against the roof and, more gently, against leaves and the branches in the garden.

"It's nice here," Reese said. It was pretty and pleasant, even with the rain.

"Not bad at all," Dee Dee agreed. "This place is totally Mom. And Dad's place was totally Dad. When we went to Dad's after the divorce, I always had to take a deep breath before I went in."

Finn agreed. "Going to Dad's was like, get ready, here we go with the interrogation and then the disapproval."

"Yeah, he was really hard on Finn," Dee Dee confirmed.

"Maybe I reminded him of you," Finn said to Blake with a smirk and a wink.

"You should be so lucky," Reese told him.

Blake looked at him wide-eyed then he grinned and tried not to blush as everyone stared at him. They all loved to see him embarrassed.

Sitting there, they waited out the last drops. Blake and Reese sat close together on one side of the bench. At first, only their shoulders were touching. That wasn't enough. Blake reached over and put his arm around Reese's shoulders. Reese turned and smiled at him.

Finn ruined the moment by reminding them that there were minors present. Blake only pulled Reese closer and felt him lean in and put a hand on his knee.

"This is what it's like when you have a real boyfriend," Reese taunted Finn.

While Finn glared, Blake stopped breathing, maybe forever. Just like that, Reese claimed him as his boyfriend.

Dee Dee laughed, delighted. "You two are official now!" She looked really happy for him and Reese.

"I would be happy for you too if you weren't rubbing my nose in it," Finn told them.

Blake started breathing, but he wasn't over the shock yet. To bring him back to life, Reese squeezed his knee.

"The rain stopped. Let's go," Dee Dee said and jumped up.

As Blake and Reese followed, they walked with their arms around each other. In part they did it to taunt Finn. Whatever the reason, it made Blake incredibly happy.

Chapter 17

The air was damp and fragrant. It smelled crisp and clean, and it was cooler too. Within the garden, drops still fell now and then. Though it was cloudy and gray, the leaves were a deep green, shiny from the rain.

They walked out of Elway Gardens and got on the sidewalk running along Marple Road. The fancy movie theater was across the street. It looked even bigger and fancier than Blake remembered. On their side of the road, they passed small eateries. The first was Burger Bar. It had bar stools along a counter outside, but they were wet and empty right now. Blake could see high school kids hanging out inside. Finn and Dee Dee peered through the window, knocked on the glass, waved at people, but then moved on. Stoker's was one block from there. Blake remembered the giant, sky blue Stoker's letters towering over the small ice cream shop. Dee Dee went in first and looked around eagerly.

"I'll get the smoothies," she announced.

"You don't know what we want," Finn called out after her.

"I'll guess," she said and went to stand in the longer of two lines.

The guys took a seat at one of the tables. When it was Dee Dee's turn to order, Blake got a look at the guy behind the counter. Blond curls stuck out from under his blue Stoker's baseball cap. He had round glasses and big hazel eyes.

The guy reddened visibly when Dee Dee started speaking to him. Smiling and staring at her, he looked confused as if he didn't know how to fill out her order. When Dee Dee giggled, he blinked at her and smiled. He then started doing his job but very clumsily, like he had never done it before. Blake could swear that Dee Dee enjoyed every minute of his bumbling.

When Blake faced forward, he saw Reese staring at him from across the table with a look of knowing amusement.

Blake turned to Finn. "Is that why she wanted to come here?"

"That's Andrew. He goes to our school. Look at the poor guy. You can see that blush from space. He's putty in her hands. She could have her way with him right here and now," Finn said.

Blake waited for some overprotective, brotherly outburst, but Finn just stared around to see who else was there.

"What is this? I thought you were going to beat up any guy who so much as looked at her," Blake said to remind him of his earlier vow.

Finn pointed to Andrew helplessly. "Look at him. It's like someone put wire rimmed glasses on a little lamb."

"He's still a guy," Blake pointed out. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Reese smirking at him. He was leaning back with his legs stuck straight out, invading Blake's space under the table.

"He's adorable. He can have her," Finn decided.

Blake shook his head. "You are all talk."

"Don't act all tough. You couldn't hurt one curly hair on his cute, nerdy head," Finn said. "Seriously, they are cuter than a kitten swatting at a sunbeam."

That's when Dee Dee came to the table carrying a tray. She was still beaming as she sat down.

"We saw what you were doing, you hussy," Finn said as Dee Dee handed them a random selection of smoothies.

"Isn't he the cutest?" Dee Dee said, admitting her guilt. "I want to sneak him into my bedroom and do bad things to him all night long," she said while wiggling in her chair.

Blake covered his face and groaned.

"Listen to her," Finn said. "She's shameless."

"I'm trying not to," Blake told him.

Dee Dee ignored both of them. She sipped her smoothie and flashed big smiles at Andrew. Every time she did, he got flustered and had to ask people to repeat their orders.

"You're going to get that boy fired. Stop beaming your indecent thoughts in his direction," Finn told her.

As they were heading out, Finn ducked into the restroom. The rest of them were waiting outside when Blake spotted a pair of brown eyes looking his way then down. The familiar, buff figure hurried along the sidewalk. His head was down and his hands were in his pockets. Blake would swear that he was hoping not to be noticed.

"That's our favorite baseball player," Blake said as he went over to cut him off.

Nando stopped, then tried to step around him. Blake blocked his way.

"You're not going to run away again, are you?" Blake asked him.

From the look on his face, Nando knew who he was, but Blake wanted to make sure.

"Dee Dee, you want to introduce me?" Blake said when she came over to join them. Reese was a step back, hanging out by the perfectly trimmed hedge and watching.

Dee Dee looked at Blake suspiciously then said, "This is Fernando. This is my brother Blake."

"So you're Finn's boyfriend," Blake said.

"The fuck I am," Nando said, grimacing.

"Stop acting like you're ashamed of Finn, you jerk!" Dee Dee snapped at him.

"That's right. I heard you were a pussy when it comes to admitting you are gay," Blake told him.

Stepping toward him threateningly, Nando showed off his obvious strength. He was big, and his eyes flashed meanly, but Blake wasn't about to be intimidated by some high school kid no matter how well-built he was.

"Fuck you," Nando said, inches from his face.

"You kiss your daddy's ass with that mouth?" Blake asked him.

Nando launched himself at him and had Blake flat on his back. He raised his fist. Blake was ready to try and block the punch, but it never came. Nando got up off him and said, "Fuck you" through gritted teeth. Looking up, he saw Finn standing there as Reese gave Blake a hand up.

"You made the right decision not punching my brother," Finn told Nando evenly. His face was kind of cold, like he didn't like how close Nando came to doing it. "See you tomorrow," Finn said to him, letting him know that he should get on his way.

Nando stared for a moment, looking kind of stricken at Finn's icy attitude, but then he walked away.

"What the hell was that?!" Finn said, turning to Blake. He was all fiery now.

"I call it an intervention," Blake said.

"The fuck you do. What are you doing picking a fight with my kind

of, sort of, maybe boyfriend?" Finn said.

"My brotherly duty," Blake answered.

"Stop answering my rhetorical questions!"

"They sound just like regular questions to me," Blake said. "And as for your not-boyfriend, he needs to man up."

"That's not up to you to decide," Finn told him.

He was right and Blake knew it.

"I was just trying to keep him from turning into me," Blake admitted. He didn't want Finn to be mad at him when he was so close to leaving town.

Finn still glared at him. "I understand why you would want to prevent that at all costs, but I can handle Nando myself. OK?"

"I denied who I was for too long and lost years that I could have been with Reese because of it. Baiting Nando had more to do with me and my regrets than with either him or you," Blake said to explain himself.

"Obviously," Finn said. "Nando is not you, and I'm not Reese, so lay off."

"I know I overstepped," Blake conceded.

Finn shrugged. "It's not all bad. It's kind of cool to have my big brother sticking up for me. It's also kind of uncool."

As they continued walking back to the house, Blake asked, "What makes this guy worth it?" He might as well have been asking the question about himself. He couldn't see one reason why he deserved Reese. And from what he could tell, this Nando didn't deserve someone as loyal and tenacious as Finn either.

Instead of answering, at first Finn just stared at him. "You saw him," he said finally as if that explained it all.

Blake shook his head.

"What?" Finn asked. "That level of hotness isn't good enough for your precious little brother?" Finn nudged him and made him bump into Reese then he got serious. "He wants to make his dad proud. Nando is his whole world since his mother died giving birth to him. It's great how much he loves his kid, but that's why Nando can't stand to disappoint him. You should see them together. His dad is so proud of him, always hugging him. I can't remember one time that

our dad hugged me, not even when I was little. Damn. I guess I kind of understand Nando not wanting to lose that closeness. He doesn't want to see anything other than pride in his father's eyes. I guess he doesn't want to be me," Finn said with a shrug.

"Fernando should have some pride in himself," Blake said. He didn't like that Finn looked down about their father and about Nando on top of that.

"I can't tell him how to live his life. I just wish I could stay away from him. But when he looks at me with those soft, brown eyes, he just drags me down," Finn said with a sigh. Then he looked from Blake to Reese. "You know how that is."

That's when Dee Dee stepped in. "Stop being mopey and bitchy. Blake is leaving tomorrow," she told Finn just as they arrived in front of their house.

"It's OK," Blake told her. "Having a brother isn't all hearts and flowers."

"What about having a sister?" she asked, peering at him.

"Hearts, flowers, balloons, stuffed animals, the whole deal," Blake told her.

She hugged him tightly then pulled back and stared at him intently. "Say you'll miss us," she demanded.

"I'll miss you guys," Blake admitted.

"Ha! He loves us," Finn crowed.

"I love Dee Dee, and I'll probably get used to you eventually," Blake said to him, but he couldn't keep a straight face.

"You love me. Don't lie," Finn said and hugged him. Dee Dee joined in and all three of them shared a hug.

Blake couldn't believe how much he was going to miss them after knowing them for such a short time. But since they were born, he had saved a place in his heart for them. It wasn't enough. With the two of them and Reese back in his life, he felt like his heart might burst. Tears came into his eyes.

"I don't want you to disappear again," Dee Dee said to him as he and Reese headed to his car.

"I won't. I promise," Blake told her.

Yu Lin and her mother came out to say goodbye to Blake and Reese as well. Blake had never had this experience of a whole

family sending him off, telling him to drive carefully and making him promise to keep in touch. Reese probably didn't either. It was pretty damn weird and great.

Chapter 18

Rain started up again just as Blake and Reese got out of the car in the motel parking lot. They raced each other up the stairs and through the door but still got drenched.

In the room they stood laughing then grinning at each other. Wet from the rain, his clothes stuck to him, Reese was unbelievably tempting. Blake just wanted to peel his clothes off, and lick the moisture from his skin.

Just as Blake's thoughts were getting especially x-rated, Reese turned and narrowed his eyes at him.

"I see a certain look in your eyes. Just so you know, I won't be making the first move. I've done you enough favors tonight." Reese crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

"Oh," Blake said. He was willing to take that bet.

Reese gave him a just try me smirk. Damn, he was irresistible. But knowing he was being tested, Blake wasn't going to go to him. Instead, Blake stripped out of his shirt and threw it over the only chair in the room. Reese followed Blake's movements. His eyes traced a line from his eyes to his mouth down his bare chest. The look stopped at Blake's belt as he started to unbuckle it. Blake did it slowly, making each motion count. He unbuttoned his jeans the same way.

The buttons undone, his jeans were riding low on his hips. With the way Reese stared, Blake could tell that he was dying to have him again. Blake was still caught off guard when Reese grabbed him around the waist and swung him into the wall. He pushed Blake into the corner pinning him there like he thought he might escape. His eyes were fiery, his jaw clenched as he looked at Blake's mouth.

His fingers digging into Blake's sides, Reese kissed him hard. His lips were hot against Blake's, opening against his, stealing his breath. It was a greedy, demanding kiss that pulled at Blake's soul. Pressed up against him, Reese was grinding into him. Blake could feel every inch of his hard, lean body and especially his cock. Reese kissed him and held onto him with an intensity of someone who wanted to possess him.

Reese's hands were in his damp hair then down the back of his neck. Fingers gripping tightly, he pulled Blake in until the kiss became almost painful and they both drew back gasping for breath. Holding him tighter and tighter as they kissed again, Blake couldn't get close enough to Reese. He wanted to be inside him.

He pushed Reese back so he could get him naked. That wasn't easy with Reese grabbing for his jeans to get them off all the way. Crashing into each other, tripping each other up, they were trying to tear each other's clothes off as fast as they could.

When he had Reese's t-shirt off and jeans undone to reveal his cock, Blake just stopped. The sight of Reese's hard cock made his mouth water. Instinctively, his knees hit the floor and he had Reese in his mouth within seconds. Reese's cock, both silky and rock hard, moved in his mouth making Blake moan. He could just live on that sensation, never eat, drink or breathe, just as long as Reese's cock pushed in and out between his lips, gliding along his tongue, crowding his throat.

As Blake was losing himself to that feeling, Reese stepped back, suddenly out of reach. Letting out an unhappy grunt, Blake grabbed for him, wanting to drag him back. Desperate for his cock, he took hold of Reese's jeans. Reese pushed his head back.

"Settle down. I'm not going anywhere. I'm all yours," Reese said to him.

Blake chuckled at his own shameless need for him.

"I can't believe you're real and you're here," he gasped. "How did I ever think I could live without you?"

Reese stepped closer but not to let Blake give him head.

"Come here," Reese said pulling him up and toward the bed. "I want to fuck."

It was what Blake wanted to hear, but he still hesitated, scared of getting what he wanted.

"Are you sure?" Blake asked. He felt unworthy.

"I know what I want. Always have," Reese told him smugly and kissed him. "You're late to the party. I was ready for you five years ago," Reese told him.

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Make it up to me," Reese demanded.

"I want to be good to you."

"Go right ahead. I'm all for that. Proceed," Reese said with deliberate arrogance in the face of Blake's groveling.

"How long are you going to be a dick to me?" Blake asked, smiling at Reese's imperious attitude.

"What? You don't think you earned it?" Reese asked while smiling seductively.

"I have no objections. I'll take everything you throw at me until I've proven myself to you."

"Sounds like a plan," Reese said.

Reese then settled himself on the bed, and Blake pulled his jeans and boxers off. Lying there, Reese was a vision from his filthiest fantasies. Rock hard, legs parted, biting his lower lip, he was a picture of deliberate provocation. His look said come and get me as his foot rubbed the inside of Blake's thigh.

While Reese displayed himself lewdly, Blake went to kneel between his legs. Lifting one leg, he kissed his way up from Reese's foot to his crotch. He tongued his balls then skipped his cock and licked his navel. Reese grunted and Blake moved up over his taut belly to his chest. Using his teeth on the nipples a little, he made Reese gasp and writhe.

Blake kissed his mouth next. It was a long kiss. In it Blake could feel how much Reese wanted him. He hoped Reese could read his desire as well. Impatient for more, Reese was shifting under him, thrusting and grinding into him.

Blake moved on to kissing his neck and felt Reese clutching at him. Blake pressed his lips to the crook of his neck. He wanted to measure every part of Reese with the touch of his lips. How many kisses could he place along his shoulder and down his arm until he was kissing his knuckles and sucking his fingers into his mouth?

Reese moaned with abandon, and Blake kissed every inch of his face until their mouths met. Reese moaned into the kiss. Blake felt like Reese was slowly opening to him and losing himself to the moment. They were connecting. Then Reese suddenly stopped. His eyes looked into Blake's like Reese wanted to take possession of him with his stare alone. But he had already done that the first time their eyes met.

Reaching up his hand, Reese cupped his face. "You know, I've had plenty of sex, but I've never made love. Yeah, I know it's corny, but that corny crap is what I want from you."

"I can deliver," Blake told him then he just gazed at him and gathered all the courage he had. "I love you," he said to Reese.

He wasn't sure Reese was ready to hear it, but Blake couldn't fuck him without telling him he loved him.

"That's not what I meant," Reese said after a shocked moment of silence.

But Blake could see happiness spread over his face as soon as he heard those words. It was in his smile and in his shining eyes.

"I always loved you. I just didn't know." Blake kissed Reese so he wouldn't feel like he had to say anything in return. As Reese's arms wrapped around him, Blake felt all the love he had finally put into words building inside him. He would let it build until it shattered him, until there was nothing left of him except the man who loved Reese.

*

As Blake's mouth moved over his body, Reese was crazy with need. Blake was savoring him, tasting and licking what he planned to devour. Reese had never felt anyone slowly take possession of him like that. Inch by inch, his whole being belonged to Blake.

Reese had the same instinct to claim Blake. His hands wanted to grope Blake until he was bruised, marked forever. But it was good to just feel the shifting of Blake's muscles, the strength of his body and the gentleness of his touch. Blake had a way of caressing him that was natural and assured, like he knew that Reese was his despite everything. And if there was any part that Reese held back, it was Blake's as soon as he said he loved him.

After that confession, every time his eyes met Reese's, it was a silent "I love you" and a promise to make him come. Reese couldn't wait to have Blake inside him.

As Blake pushed his legs up over his head, Reese gasped and moaned in anticipation. With his legs out of the way, Blake slipped his hand down Reese crack and rubbed his hole, making him thrash

and buck under him.

"Tell me you want me as much as I want you," Blake said as he pressed his thumb in.

"Eat me," Reese said and then grinned at him.

Blake smiled and lowered his head. He started licking at his hole as if prepared to torture it with his tongue until Reese told him that he was dying for him.

"Oh, God," Reese said feeling the tip of Blake's tongue starting to enter him. Reese writhed as the sensation undid all the resistance inside him. Every other sex act he had ever performed evaporated. All the fearful knots inside him unraveled for Blake and the magic of his tongue probing him. As Blake explored him, Reese moaned louder and louder. In a haze of pleasure, he remembered what they were supposed to be doing.

"Hey, cut it out. I don't want to come like that," he told Blake.

Blake eased off with a regretful moan. He got the condom on and lubed both his cock and Reese's hole without taking his eyes off him. When he was ready, Reese put his legs on Blake's shoulders.

Sliding one hand under him, Blake used the other to guide himself in. Reese surged toward him. He was hot and needy, moaning and clawing at Blake. His fingers were digging into Blake's shoulders. Dragging his hands down Blake's back to his ass, he wanted him deeper inside, but Blake kept to his own pace.

Feeling Blake filling him was a searing, cruel bliss. Reese felt like everything that ever happened between them was happening in that moment. With Blake deep inside him, Reese moaned. The stillness, Blake's hard breathing and tensed muscles were everything to Reese, a frozen paradise. It was a relief when Blake started moving.

His slow thrusts were hard to take at first. Reese's body and mind struggled to accept that this time was different. This time it was Blake. Blake was fucking him and it was amazing. It was blazing hot and almost painful to his heart and soul.

As the grip of Reese's body eased up a little, Blake started pumping harder. Folded up with his legs over Blake's shoulders, Reese was in heaven. Blake leaned down to kiss him, breaking his rhythm then picked it up again. Reese kneaded his ass, feeling the muscles work as Blake moved in and out of him.

Sweat-drenched, Reese rose to kiss Blake. His lips trembled against Blake's. His tongue flicked out to taste him. Then he dropped back into a shaking mess of limbs that clutched at Blake. The thorough fuck was slowly undoing all the connections between his brain and his body. Reese was a mindless animal that only knew how to curse and scream Blake's name.

When Blake picked up speed, Reese felt like he would die from pleasure and love. Then ecstasy crashed into him, nearly knocked him off the bed as his back arched and his whole body turned to steel. He was coming and Blake was calling his name, coming as well, joining Reese. Blake slumped on top of him, sweating, kissing him and almost sobbing his name.

He wouldn't stop kissing Reese until he told him he couldn't breathe. Slowing down, Blake placed quick, soft kisses on his lips. When he stared down at Reese, his eyes expressed so much emotion. Reese hugged him tightly though his limbs felt heavy. Blake pulled away to clean them up then got back into bed. As their bodies cooled down, they started to feel the chill of the rainy night and pulled up the disarranged covers.

Blake wrapped him up in his arms and hooked his legs around him too. "I'll keep you warm," he said and Reese laughed at him. But damn, it felt good to be held like that after a fuck or making love or whatever amazing thing they just did. Reese didn't want him ever to let go.

Reese was smothered by a heavy, thick shadow. He couldn't breathe. Shocked awake, Reese flailed, trying to free himself of Blake. His eyes snapped open, but he couldn't see. He breathed hard for a while, still blind. Then he blinked in confusion until he focused on Blake. His breathing slowed.

"Oh," Reese said. "Hey."

"Right. Hey," Blake said. He had trouble breathing too. "What was that?"

"Shitty nightmare. The usual." Reese still couldn't bring himself to talk about it.

"You don't want to tell me?" Blake said.

"No. Not right now." Reese shook his head to get rid of the

remnants of bad dreams and memories. Feeling Blake's soothing hands caressing his side helped. He could see that there was still pain in Blake's eyes, and he gritted his teeth. "There's so much that I want to get rid of and forget. I feel like my past is always chasing me down, trying to pull me back there, into that stinking darkness."

"Not while I'm here," Blake vowed and kissed his hand.

"Yeah, you're nice to have around," Reese said and sneered at Blake's earnestness a little. He couldn't let him get all serious like that. Blake was still frowning at him so Reese kissed him quickly on the mouth.

As he nestled against him, Reese remembered dreaming about Blake all those days and nights when he was alone and scared to fall sleep. Blake was there telling him, "You're safe. I'm here." It wasn't fair that he finally had the real Blake, warm, muscular, bare skin against skin, and he was being pulled away from him by nightmares.

Blake kissed his temple and his earlobe while his hands stroked his naked back, calming him. Reese looked at him one last time. Even as his eyes closed, he knew Blake wouldn't be sleeping, that he would be watching over him. It wasn't at all bad to know how much Blake loved him and to always feel his eyes on him. His guardian angel, his fallen angel, he was the man Reese was going to love forever.

Chapter 19

After his nightmare, Reese slept like a baby, and it was Blake who couldn't rest. He willed himself not to move and stayed alert to even the smallest sign that Reese wasn't sleeping peacefully. From now on, Blake was determined to guard him even from his nightmares. He would never let Reese's terrible past swallow him.

Blake might not be sleeping, but it was like he was having the best dream of his life. To be like this with Reese was a gift. Lying against him, Blake could feel every breath he took, every heartbeat. Reese was naked in his arms. His body was warm and relaxed. The beating of his heart was music that Blake could listen to forever. Reese smelled familiar, both comforting and arousing. For years, this was the scent that Blake only breathed in his dreams. Now he couldn't get enough of it.

By the time morning light sneaked into the room, Reese was sprawled over Blake, leg and arm thrown over him. Blake's hardening cock was against his hip. Reese face was nestled in the crook of his shoulder. When Blake started to wake him with kisses and light groping, he let out soft, complaining moans. As Blake tousled his hair, Reese turned over lazily and burrowed into him.

"You smell so good," Reese said. He kept his lips against Blake's neck, and his words hummed through Blake and made him shiver.

Turning Reese on his back, Blake kissed him tenderly at first. He wanted Reese to know how much he cared even as he mauled him. He kissed his bottom lip then the top then one corner of his mouth and the other. Reese bit his bottom lip then he licked it. He deepened the kiss, moaning into it. Blake felt him grip the back of his neck tightly to pull him in closer and deeper. With Reese drawing him in like he wanted Blake to drown in him, he couldn't hold back for long. Blake broke off the kiss and moved down Reese's body.

"Hey," Reese complained. "I wasn't done kissing you."

"Can't wait," Blake told him. His chin was already rubbing against the hairs at the base of Reese's cock. He licked his way up the shaft as Reese panted his name.

When Blake swirled his tongue around the head of his cock and

sucked gently, Reese cursed him and tugged at his hair like he wanted to punish him for the pleasure he was giving him.

"I'm a greedy fuck," Blake said unapologetically. "I can't get enough of you. Now be good and let me love you." He took Reese's cock in his mouth and listened to his moans get louder.

Even after they sucked each other off thoroughly, Blake didn't stay satisfied for long. Reese had to order him to stay out of the bathroom while he showered. When he got out, Blake pounced on him. Reese was still wet, but he had his jeans on and he didn't let Blake get him out of them. Blake dragged him toward the bed.

"You're getting spoiled," Reese told him.

With Reese in his arms, Blake lay down on the bed. As Reese landed on top of him, drops of water from his hair fell on Blake's face. His blue eyes shone. Blake felt so happy then immediately started thinking about how he didn't deserve to be happy.

"I can't figure out how to make up for what I did," Blake said.

"I didn't do the right thing either. It's not like I told you I loved you. I just reached for your cock." Reese shifted on top of him so that his cock and Blake's were aligned, semi-hard, rubbing through two pairs of jeans.

"Maybe I had a right to get mad but not to hit you or turn my back on you," Blake insisted even as Reese's subtle movements threatened to distract him from his guilt.

"I hit you too. And then after, I didn't reach out to you out of pride and anger, and I lost you. I've been feeling guilty too you know. I'm not a saint," Reese said, looking gloomy.

Blake hated that he brought him down. He squeezed him tighter.

Reese smiled at him. "You already did the most important thing to make it up to me. You dragged yourself here for me. That's what counts."

"I had to. I felt like I couldn't live my life until I settled things with you."

"Settled things?" Reese asked.

"I don't know, I guess, told you I was sorry, heard you tell me to fuck off, made you forgive me, made you love me."

"I never stopped loving you, not for one second," Reese said, and

the look in his eyes was like all the light in the world spilling down over Blake.

Hearing those words, he had to hold his breath, stop time, hold on to this moment forever.

"I don't deserve that," Blake told him in a gasp of breath. "I didn't know what love was until I met you. Then I threw it away."

Reese was silent for a little bit. Then he spoke in a hushed voice with his eyes far away. "I never thought this would happen, that you would come back to me. I thought I would have to spend the rest of my life missing you." Reese looked so forlorn as he said that.

"You still came here," Blake pointed out.

"I had to take one more chance on you. There wasn't a day that I didn't think about you." Reese's eyes were so earnest and pure as he looked at Blake.

"But how can you trust me with your heart?" Blake asked.

"I don't know," Reese answered immediately. "I guess because I don't have any choice. I already gave it to you. I've loved you too long and too hard to ever be able to stop."

"From now on, I'll make sure you never have to regret it," Blake promised.

Reese gave him a small shy smile. He took both of Blake's hands in his and joined them over Blake's head. Fingers locked together, Reese gripped him almost painfully.

"You can't imagine what you mean to me," Reese said. "You're everything I need."

They kissed and held each other for a while, finally together, sharing the same feeling of love.

Surprising even himself, Blake was the one who realized they should be going. As it was, they would probably get stuck in the morning rush hour traffic. Showered and ready to go, they got their stuff together. Blake constantly glanced at Reese, admiring him and feeling lucky.

"Thanks for talking me into staying one more night," Blake said, grateful to Reese in so many ways.

"It was worth it, wasn't it?" Reese said, sounding kind of smug.

"It was totally worth it to have dinner and hang out with Finn and

Dee Dee," Blake said to tease him.

"It's too soon to start taking me for granted," Reese warned him.

"I could never do that," Blake said. He came up behind Reese and slipped his hands around his waist. "You were right to push me to say goodbye properly. And I know you wanted to stay for dinner for my sake."

"Don't be all grateful. That's what couples do," Reese told him.

"We're a couple," Blake said. That was so weird but good.

"We always were. You just didn't know." Reese turned to look at him, and in his blue eyes, Blake saw that confidence and absolute knowledge of what they were to each other.

"So in high school, every time we walked around, I was walking around with my boyfriend?" Blake asked.

"That's right."

"I like that our relationship is retroactive," Blake said but then he got serious. "But it makes what I did worse."

Reese frowned at him. "OK, I'll make you a deal. I promise to stop rewriting history if you stop dwelling on it," Reese told him archly. "The main thing is that we're together now."

"And maybe after all this time, I'll know to hold onto you no matter what," Blake said.

That lesson came at too high a price. He was never going to let go. From now on, Blake was determined to make sure Reese was safe and happy even if it killed him. To seal that vow, he pulled Reese into a kiss.

They were almost ready to head out. Only a few last things were left to be stuffed into their bags.

"Are you sure you're not going to visit your mother?" Reese asked as he made sure he had everything in his backpack.

"Not planning to," Blake told him offhandedly.

"We can make a quick stop. She's the only one who can give you any answers now about your father and what he did and why," Reese pointed out.

Blake shook his head. "She would just lie." The thought of speaking to her filled him with distaste, but Reese didn't let up.

"You owe it to yourself to try. Maybe now that your father is gone, she has less reason to lie."

"Maybe," Blake said. He did wonder about that possibility.

"I'll wait in the car though," Reese said deadpan. Then he added. "And we have to stop at one other place before we go."

"Where?" Blake wanted to know, but Reese acted coy.

"I'll tell you when you finish up at your mother's."

Blake still wasn't sure it wouldn't be a waste of time to see her. He was about to tell Reese about his misgivings when they heard familiar voices and knocking on the motel room door.

"Thank God you're still here," Dee Dee said as Blake opened the door.

"Just barely," Reese told her and Finn.

"So we're just in time to say goodbye? No breakfast?" Finn asked, looking from Reese to Blake.

"We said goodbye last night," Blake reminded him and Dee Dee.

"We ditched school for you," Dee Dee said mournfully. Clearly ditching was a big deal to her.

"This means I'm definitely not going," Blake said to Reese. He didn't want to give up spending time with the twins. Really any excuse not to visit his mother was fine.

"What?" Finn and Dee Dee wanted to know.

"He is going to go see his mother," Reese told them. He obviously thought that was still happening.

"Oh," the twins said with funny looks on their faces.

"They met her," Blake said to explain their expressions to Reese.

"You should go. We can bother Reese for a while," Dee Dee told him solemnly.

"Actually, the three of us can go ahead to Wellinger's and you can meet us there," Reese said.

"That's where you wanted to go?" Blake asked. He couldn't believe it. What a strange thing to want to relive in their last hours in town.

"I can't pass it up." Reese grinned devilishly.

"Great. Show them the place where you almost broke your neck," Blake said. It had been a terrifying moment, and Reese looked like he wanted to celebrate it.

"You went first. That was your silent declaration of love even if you didn't know it," Reese said.

"You could have died," Blake told him. He didn't like how cheerful

he looked about that little adventure.

"You were there to save me," Reese said, proud of how crazy both of them had been.

Blake's blood ran cold at the memory.

The twins had been looking back and forth between them, getting more impatient by the second.

"What? What you are you talking about," Dee Dee wanted to know.

"Stop being mysterious," Finn said.

"Reese can fill you in," Blake said as he opened the door ready to head out. He grabbed both his duffel bag and Reese's backpack to put in the car.

Reese swooped in and kissed him. Now Blake's face felt burning hot, and he really wished the twins weren't there. Then he realized that he might not see them for a while. In that case, he didn't mind if they hung around that morning. They could keep Reese company while Blake made the unpleasant visit to his mother.

Chapter 20

Tierney Lane hadn't changed much since Blake lived there. He wished it had. The only good memories he had were when Reese came by. As he saw his mother's house come into view among the old trees, Blake had to gather the courage to get out of his car and approach. Just being on this street was like stepping into the past.

This was one of the oldest neighborhoods in Meadowview. All the families with old money owned houses here. They weren't as flashy as the houses by the country club, but the neighborhood had tons of prestige. That's why Blake's mother was determined to buy that awful house.

After the divorce, his mother couldn't afford to live in the good part of Meadowview any more. She had received a lump sum from his father. That was the money that paid for the house on Tierney Lane. Blake knew that his mother had a small trust fund from her family. That's what they lived on, but it didn't even come close to the kind of money Jim Monroe had.

That's why she latched on to anyone as long as they came with a fat bank account. Meadowview was the right place to find men with money, but none of them stuck around for long. Blake didn't either.

He didn't think he would ever be standing in front of that house again. The worst house in the best neighborhood, his mother had called it. The house was falling apart around them, but she had no money to fix it up. She did get one of her boyfriends to pay for patching up the roof. She wanted him to pay for a whole new roof, or even better a whole new house. It never worked out that way. Her greed always exceeded the power she had over the men in her life. She could never make them stay and fork over any kind of serious money. That's why she grew so desperate and latched onto the old man who lived across the street.

Blake turned away from his mother's house to look at the mansion that had once belonged to Mr. Fenwick. It wasn't the blocky, old thing he remembered. It had been remodeled and modernized, but that didn't erase the sick feeling it still gave Blake when he looked at

it.

He had been in high school, almost done with his senior year. All sorts of plans were swirling in his head. Most of them involved getting as far as he could from Meadowview. That whole thing with Mr. Fenwick cinched it.

Mr. Fenwick was very old and had lived in that big, boxy, old house across the street. He was friendly to Blake when he was little, unlike some of the other neighbors, who transferred their dislike of his mother onto him.

For years after Mrs. Fenwick died, Blake would see Mr. Fenwick shuffling in his garden with sheers in hand, painstakingly trimming the plants or watering them. He always waved when he saw Blake. After a while, Blake hardly ever saw him. The few times he caught sight of the old man, he was wearing a robe and slippers late in the day. A few times he was in bare feet and only wore pajamas.

One day Blake saw him walking down the street, dressed only in his pajama bottoms. He had his watering can in his hand, and he looked around in confusion. Blake took him home. Back in his own house, Mr. Fenwick was himself again, and he thanked Blake for his help.

It was pretty clear that he was starting to lose it, Alzheimer's probably. He didn't have any family nearby. He had a maid who came in once a week, but no one to take care of him. That's when Blake's mother decided to befriend him.

"The poor man, he has no one." That's what she was counting on.

She started going out with Mr. Fenwick and got him to spend some money on her. But that was all she got out of him. She couldn't make him marry her while he was still somewhat competent. By the time she might have been able to get him to the altar, Mr. Fenwick had deteriorated so much that the marriage wouldn't have been valid. There was already talk about his strange outbursts in public as he became disoriented and sometimes belligerent.

Blake expected his mother to give up after their outings became embarrassing, but she still visited Mr. Fenwick at his house. Blake didn't know why she still went over there. He found out when she asked Blake to come along.

She claimed that Mr. Fenwick needed him to move some boxes

from the attic. Once Blake arrived, Mr. Fenwick didn't know anything about that. He really didn't know much of anything at all.

When Blake came in, his mother pointed to him and said to Mr. Fenwick, "Look. There he is. He's here. You know who he is, don't you?"

Mr. Fenwick stared blankly at Blake. Then he reached out to him and started to cry. He called him "My boy."

Blake didn't know what to do. He looked at his mother. She was smiling. Blake backed out of the room and left.

"You need to leave that poor old man alone," Blake told her when she came home. He didn't know what she was up to, but he knew it had to be something underhanded.

"Poor? Ha!" His mother laughed. Seeing how Blake looked at her, she sobered a little. "There's no harm in it. It makes him happy." She told him how Mr. Fenwick had lost his son in the Vietnam War. It was easy to make him believe Blake was his dead son. Half the time he believed Blake's mother was his dead wife.

Blake warned her not to try to use him again, but he couldn't keep her from going back there. She even tried to get him to go, but he refused. In fact, Blake did go back when his mother didn't know about it. He followed her, wanting to see what she was up to.

Hiding in the garden, he circled Mr. Fenwick's house until he heard his mother's voice through an open window. He went closer and crouched under the window to listen.

That's when he overheard her telling the old guy, "You don't want your son to starve, to go homeless like all those poor Vietnam veterans you hear about. You don't want him to have to sell his medals. He needs your help. Fifty thousand, that's all. It's for your son. That's not a lot to ask for a hero. Here. Just write your name. That's all. Just write your name."

Blake risked a look so he could see what she was doing. His mother was holding out a checkbook in front of Mr. Fenwick. As he was seated hunched over his desk, she tried to make him hold a pen. She kept closing his fingers around it, but the old man was looking off into the distance and his hand kept opening. For a moment, his eyes fell on Blake at the window. The old man started to smile.

That's when Blake saw his mother hit Mr. Fenwick. She hit his head with the flat of her hand several times, and the old man started to cry pitifully.

Blake climbed in through the window and pulled his mother away from him.

"If you ever come here again, I'll call the police!" he told her.

Mr. Fenwick was still crying like a child. Blake's mother was screaming at Blake that he was just like his father. With her insults in his ears, Blake tried to console the frail old man. As Blake told him that he was going to be OK, Mr. Fenwick clutched at his hand and cried for his daddy.

After that, Blake asked around the neighborhood and finally got one of the neighbors to track down Mr. Fenwick's estranged daughter. She flew into town and had Mr. Fenwick put in a home.

But it didn't end there. A number of valuable items were missing from Mr. Fenwick's house, including his late wife's jewelry. His daughter asked Blake's mother about that. She blamed the maid.

Blake was sure that his mother was responsible, and Mr. Fenwick's daughter seemed to agree. The whole neighborhood shunned his mother after that.

In his own way, Blake did too. It was too painful to look at her so Blake stayed out of the house as much as he could. He got two part time jobs so he would have money when he moved away. Without Reese there, nothing was left to keep Blake in Meadowview.

With every passing year, with every step toward adulthood, Blake had been seeing his mother more clearly. In his eyes, she had once been beautiful but unpredictable, quick to get angry, never happy with any gift or any gesture of love. Now Blake saw a monster, a creature always grasping for money and capable of anything.

At the end of his last year of high school, Blake packed his belongings and left town, left his mother. He only regretted that he hadn't done it sooner. He should never have let Reese leave town alone. He should have gone to him, gotten on his knees, begged his forgiveness, and asked him to run away with him just like they planned. To this day, he regretted waiting around to finish the school year and get his diploma instead of going after Reese as soon as he

could.

When he finally left Meadowview, Blake had no idea where Reese was. At every turn, Blake failed him. But at that time, Blake still hadn't figured himself out. It was only after he got away from his mother and her cloud of hate that Blake could start to think clearly and realize who he was and become his own man.

Now after years of not missing her, Blake was finally going to see his mother. As he stood next to his car, Blake took a deep breath before he could take even one step closer to his old home. Just looking at that house brought back so many bad memories. He almost turned around and left. But then he remembered how, years ago, Reese would wait defiantly for him in front of that house though he knew Blake's mother hated him. He smiled thinking of how Reese waved at her where she stood in the window glaring at him.

With both the past and present Reese giving him courage, Blake walked up the crumbling walkway onto the rotting planks of the porch and knocked. His mother opened the door in one swift motion and beamed at him as she invited him in.

The ingratiating smile was weird, but in most ways she hadn't changed that much. Her dark, wavy hair still cascaded down her back, gleaming and luxurious. Long, spidery eyelashes set off her blue eyes. Her figure was flawless, curvy but trim. Even the people who hated her, and there were many, admitted that she was beautiful.

Blake did see some signs of expertly done cosmetic enhancements. He wondered which boyfriend had paid for that. Her flaws were never on the outside though. The ugliness was all on the inside, and too many times Blake had seen it spilling over.

Though his mother insisted he sit and have a drink with her, Blake refused. He stood while she poured herself a drink from the bar in the living room. Looking around, he saw new, expensive furniture, but the new rug couldn't hide the warped floor that had suffered years of water damage. Everything he saw of the place told him that the house should just be torn down.

"I bet he didn't leave either of us anything," his mother said acidly

after a good sip of her brandy. At least she got to the point without insisting on chit-chat.

"That wouldn't be a surprise," Blake told her, keeping his tone even.

She turned to him decisively. "You need to hire a lawyer."

"No," Blake said without even hearing her out. He knew she wanted to use him to get his father's money. It wouldn't have been the first time.

She once told him that she tried to get a friend of hers to talk to his father, to ask him for money for Blake to go to "a decent school". His father's answer was, "Tell that woman that she and her spawn got everything they are ever going to get from me." Blake's mother repeated this to him at the top of her voice. Blake was a little kid then, and he was afraid to ask her what spawn meant, but he knew it had to be bad.

"You are his son. You have a right to an inheritance. As his firstborn, you have a stronger claim than those two," she said with contempt. "You have to contest that will."

The odd thing was that she had never gone to court to try and squeeze money from his father. It always puzzled him.

"What did my father hold over your head all this time? You never dragged him into court while he was alive. How was he keeping you in check?" Blake wondered. No scandal would have kept her from the kind of money his father had. It had to be something much worse.

"I didn't do anything," she claimed.

Blake thought of a way he might be able to get some truth out of her. "If you want me to contest the will, I'll need to know why I was cut out of it in the first place."

"Let the lawyer handle it," she insisted.

"I bet you already have one picked out," Blake said.

She admitted it right away. "I do. He has handled this kind of thing before. He's very good." She went over to get her purse and pulled out a business card. She tried to hand it to Blake, but he wouldn't take it.

"I'll call him only if you tell me what my father had on you. I won't go into a courtroom without having all the information. Tell me or I

walk out," Blake told her.

She thought for a moment then took a deep breath. "I didn't do anything. It was Don."

Blake remembered him. He was around in the first days after they got kicked out of his father's house. Don and Blake's mother had a lot of hushed arguments. He didn't stick around for long though.

Blake decided to play along. "OK. What did Don do?"

"He talked about what if something happened to your father," she said trying to veil her real meaning.

"Happened to him?"

"Like an accident," she said with a shrug.

"And my father found out what you were planning," Blake guessed.

"He had private investigators following me, spying on me, recording me!" she screamed indignantly.

"And he got proof, not only that you were cheating on him, but that you were plotting to kill him," Blake realized.

His mother was not the least bit ashamed or remorseful. She was very much herself. She ranted. "He brought it on himself. He was going to divorce me. And according to that ridiculous prenup he made me sign, I would get practically nothing!"

"So you decided to kill him." Blake wasn't surprised. This was who she was.

"He was horrible!" she claimed.

"Was he hitting you?" Blake asked.

"He was suffocating me. I wanted to live, to travel, to have fun. All he did was work. We only ever traveled for business. And if I spent too much money, he would yell," she said like she expected Blake to take her side.

"Obviously he deserved to die," Blake said. He wasn't sure if the sarcasm would be lost on her or not.

"You would have been rich," she said. That was true.

"As his only son, I would have gotten most of his money, which you would have control over."

"You can still get it," she told him. "Maybe not all of it, but some of it at least."

He looked at her. She wanted to make him rich, make him into one

of those men she cajoled into paying her bills. Blake realized that he had been free of her all this time only because he had no money. He was of no use to her.

With her in the picture, Blake couldn't imagine his father's money bringing him anything but misery. He sincerely hoped that his father left him nothing in his will. Picking his father's pockets now that he was in the grave was unthinkable to him. What Blake wanted and needed from him, he would never have.

Without ever having experienced it, all Blake ever wanted as a child was a normal life. As he grew up, he wanted something that never came into focus until he came to terms with himself. Now that Reese was back in his life, he had everything he could ever want.

Blake started to leave, and his mother grabbed his arm.

"Where are you going?"

He turned to her. "Why didn't my father send you to jail?" he asked her.

"And have those surveillance tapes played in court? I told Don all kinds of things about Jim so we could laugh at him. Jim didn't want the whole town laughing at him too. He had his dignity to protect," she said meanly. Seeing the disgusted look on Blake's face, she reminded him, "Your father threw me out, and you too. Don’t forget."

"I haven't," Blake told her then he wrenched his arm away from her, and he left.

She screamed at him as he went to his car. By now, Blake was used to his mother's rants about his father, about money, about all the men who didn't want to pay her bills, about Blake himself and how ungrateful he was.

As he walked away, Blake was leaving with new knowledge about his so-called family. But none of it told him why his father turned his back on him. That was something he would never understand.

Chapter 21

Arriving in front of Wellinger Fabrications, Reese thought it was kind of weird to be visiting the place in the company of Blake's brother and sister. As they got out of the car in front of the old factory, Finn and Dee Dee were still fighting over who should have been the one to drive. Finn claimed that the drive to and from the motel counted as one trip.

"Will you ever learn to count? Two! Two trips. It was my turn," Dee Dee said.

"You guys never stop, do you?" Reese said, listening to them bicker.

"Stop what? Being ourselves? No. We're awesome," Finn said then he noticed Dee Dee looking pleased with herself. That's when he realized what he said. "Wait. No. Scratch that. I didn't mean to include her," he said, pointing at Dee Dee.

"Too late. As Reese is my witness, you said I was awesome," she crowed.

They made their way over a wall which had mostly collapse into heaps of loose and broken bricks. The sign that said Wellinger Fabrications was still there, pitted and rusted so it was hard to read.

From the first time he saw it a few weeks after arriving in Meadowview, Reese had found the ruin of the old factory irresistible. The roof had fallen in long ago. Rust ran down the remaining walls like the place was bleeding. At the same time, vines were climbing up the walls, and all sorts of green things were sprouting from the cracks in the masonry. In its own way, the place was a thing of beauty. Standing in its shadow now, Reese couldn't help but smile. He remembered all the times he and Blake hung out there, just the two of them.

"Spill it!" Finn demanded, seeing Reese just standing there, basking in memories.

Reese wanted to wait until they were in the right setting to tell them the story. He wanted to be able to relive it.

"Blake and I came here sometimes. We usually came alone, but this one time a guy we knew, Doug Neumar, was tagging along.

Blake was jealous of Doug. He was a little bit dangerous, a senior, had tattoos and a car, and worst of all, he had a thing for me."

"You are so full of yourself," Finn told him.

"Let him tell the story," Dee Dee said to him.

Blake had been furious when Doug saw them going there and horned in. How could Blake not know what he felt when he was that jealous of Doug? Doug was more manly, and he had the tough guy attitude. He swaggered around like he was hot shit, but he was just a guy trying too hard. He still made Blake seethe. Reese could still see the murderous look on his face when Doug threw an arm over Reese's shoulder.

"Let's go up so you can picture it," Reese said as he led them inside.

Open to the sky, the interior of the building was being taken over by filth and nature. Sun was shining down into the big space. There was garbage everywhere as well as plants growing. The cement floor was broken up into chunks and the walls were crumbling.

Reese moved through the big open space toward the tower-like structure in the back. It still had a roof, and the stairs looked pretty safe. Reese went up first anyway to test them.

Up there, he could see how this place used to be a working factory. Away from the elements, things stood more or less intact. There was no machinery of course, but all the posts and alcoves showed where they used to be. The one thing that Reese cared about was still there. The walkway that spanned the open space between two sides of the tower looked even less safe than before. Reese pointed it out to the twins.

"That's where it happened," he told them.

They could see all the rusted spots on the walkway and the long way down to the floor below. One wrong step could be deadly.

"Can we cross?" Finn asked anyway.

"No way. Blake would kill me," Reese told him.

Of course when Doug dared him to cross to the other side, Blake went. He marched over that rusted metal with no hesitation. Hearing the walkway creek dangerously with every step Blake took, Reese wanted to kill Doug.

Reese held his breath as Blake crossed, then he went right after

him. Blake was yelling at him to go back. Reese stared at him defiantly instead of looking where he was stepping. His foot slipped and he fell. By flailing wildly for a handhold, he managed to grab the support bar that ran underneath. He only gripped it by accident with one hand. He was barely holding on. Just as he could feel his hand slipping, Blake caught him. Held in Blake's crushing grip, his wrist hurt like hell. Reese ignored the pain and hoisted his leg up onto the ramp.

Blake pulled him up the rest of the way and cursed at him. He actually told Doug that he would fucking kill him. The look on Doug's face was priceless. He looked from Blake to Reese, and he knew the deal.

Blake still didn't even as he clutched at Reese and glared at him with worry and relief. At that moment, he really did seem to be declaring his love for Reese. It was so clearly written on his face and in every gesture toward Reese as he made sure he was OK. The only one who couldn't see it was Blake.

Finn and Dee Dee were peering at the walkway. Reese wasn't even sure that's what it was. It was narrow and there were no handholds.

"Maybe there used to be a conveyer belt that moved things across, now it's just this frame. I don't know if it was even built to hold a person, much less two," Reese said thinking aloud.

"What's on the other side?" Dee Dee asked.

"Nothing much any more. I think there used to be a lift of some kind, but it was dismantled and the opening boarded up." Reese looked around and pointed toward a well lighted area. "Let's go that way. Past that railing is this space with an amazing view of the hills. That's where Blake and I used to hang out." Reese wanted to take a picture of them together on that spot once Blake joined them.

They went toward the windows, taking care where they stepped. All over the floor were metal pieces where machinery used to be fastened. Some of them had come loose. Others just stuck out ready to trip them up. There was a railing that separated the two sections of the tower. It was kind of high. The guys had no trouble, but the only way Dee Dee could go over was to hike up her skirt.

"You two, turn around," she ordered them.

"It's your brother and a gay guy. I guarantee that no one will be looking up your skirt. Hurry it up," Finn told her.

"I'm still not going to flash my underwear in public," she told him as she started climbing and they turned away. "Stupid skirt," she said and then she screamed.

They both turned back and saw a man wearing an eye patch with his arm around her neck.

"Right into my waiting arms," he said as he looked at Reese with his one good eye and smiled.

*

Blake was sitting in his car, ready to go meet Reese, when he got a call from Roberto.

"Those two weird girls are here looking for Reese. They say they need to warn him. Is he with you?" Roberto asked.

Blake figured Roberto meant Patty and Simone and that they were at the bodega. "No," he said. "Let me talk to them."

"Since you're not at the motel, you better be on your way out of town, white bread," Patty said as soon as she got on the phone. "Reese is not answering his phone. Where is he?"

Blake felt a cold prickle down his spine. "I'm on my way to meet him. What's going on?" he asked her.

That's when Simone got on the phone. "Listen up. I have some news from Pete."

"Who?"

"Pete. Pietro," she said impatiently. "You remember Doug Neumar?"

"Sure," Blake said, not understanding what he had to do with anything.

"He was last seen talking to that one eyed man. Then he was found naked and beat up with his throat slit open."

"Fuck," Blake gasped.

"Pete says eye-patch man is lurking around. He's been seen here and there."

Not liking what he heard, Blake tried calling Reese himself. No answer. Scared out of his mind, he hurried to meet Reese at

Wellinger's. Everything is fine, he kept telling himself. He just needed to get him out of town right now.

*

Finn froze. On the other side of the railing, the man with the eye patch had one hand wrapped around Dee's neck. With the other, he carefully placed a knife to her right eye. The point of the knife rested just under the rim of her glasses, below her eye. Finn couldn't look away from that spot. The point of the knife was pressed in. It made a dent in her skin without drawing any blood yet. Dee's face was a mask of fear.

"What do you want?" Reese asked, startling Finn.

Finn didn't even realize he was holding his breath when he let it out. Reese's phone was ringing, but they all ignored the sound. He didn't even try to answer it.

"Wondering how I found you?" the man with the eye patch said. "I learned so much about you since I came here. I know all your secrets."

"Then what do you want with her?" Reese asked.

"This sweet thing?" He squeezed Dee's neck. "I just couldn't resist."

"I thought I was your type," Reese said.

Finn struggled to stay still, not to move or speak. He could hardly think as he stared at Dee in the grip of that man. He only then remembered the man's name.

Randal Mayes gave a sickening smile. "She doesn't do a thing for me, but she has a pretty pair of eyes. I can take either one or both," he threatened.

Finn only held himself back by sheer willpower. He knew any move he made could get Dee hurt or killed. Every fiber of his being itched to jump that railing and launch himself at Mayes and crush every bone in his body. If he only didn't have the point of the knife right up against Dee's eye.

"As long as you don't hurt her, I'm willing to deal," Reese said.

"Come here then," Mayes said, smiling again.

Reese moved forward. "Let her go and you can have me."

As Reese went closer, Dee mouthed his name and looked even more afraid now that Reese was going to hand himself over to that man for her sake. Reese swung himself over the railing. When Reese was close enough, Mayes threw Dee aside and grabbed him. Finn reached over the railing and caught her before she fell. He climbed over and held onto her. She was shaking. Finn was too.

Mayes now held the knife at Reese's throat and started backing away. In unison, Finn and Dee stepped closer. Mayes didn't seem too worried. If anything he looked amused.

"Nothing to worry about, kids. Me and Reese are just going to get reacquainted."

That's when they heard Blake's voice calling to Reese. None of them dared to answer him, but soon Blake's rushing footsteps could be heard on the stairs.

Finn and Dee saw him as he came up. Mayes had pulled Reese backwards toward the walkway. The two of them were halfway between Finn and Dee on one side and Blake on the other.

Finn expected Mayes to tell Blake to move out of his way so he could get away, but instead he started going backwards on the walkway. Blake looked anguished, but he didn't stop. He matched Mayes step for step until Mayes and Reese were in the middle of the walkway and Blake was on the edge of it. Finn didn't know what he could be thinking. He didn't see any possible way to save Reese.

Chapter 22

Blake had rushed there without knowing what he might find. The first sign that something was very wrong was the silence when he went inside the factory. Finn never shut up, and Dee Dee did her part too. He should have been able to hear them chattering away. He heard nothing but his own footsteps and debris shifting under his feet. When he called out and no one answered, he had no doubt. It was bad.

He went up with reckless speed as his heart beat wildly. Then he saw just how bad it was. Taking in the sight of Mayes holding Reese at knifepoint, Blake felt like all the blood and heat drained from his body. If Reese died, Blake was dead too. No. His heart and mind rebelled at the thought of Reese dying. Blake was ready to do whatever it took to stop it.

Reese with a knife to his throat froze the blood in his veins, but it was a relief to see Finn and Dee Dee were OK. Both of them looked like they were ready to rush at Mayes. Blake felt the same urge, but it was impossible to do anything while Mayes had a knife to Reese's throat.

Blake followed him as he backed himself and Reese onto the walkway, but he didn't dare step a foot on that shaky, pitted span of metal. As he stood on the edge, Blake eyed Mayes, watching for any sign of what he might do. The strange thing was that Mayes seemed glad to see him.

"Is this the lover boy?" Mayes grinned like he was looking forward to meeting him.

Blake was disturbed by his attitude. What was he planning? Mayes looked happy to see him, and Blake could think of only one reason for that. Mayes wanted him to watch Reese die.

The other side of the walkway was a dead end. Blake suspected that Mayes knew that as well, but he was still going that way. He could have told Blake to stay back and gone down the stairs. It all added up to one thing.

Afraid as he had never been in his life, Blake tried to think. There wasn't a lot of room on the walkway. To stand so close together,

Mayes and Reese stood diagonally on the narrow ramp. Mayes had stepped forward so one of his feet was in front of one of Reese's. He held on to the shoulder of Reese's jacket with his left hand and held the knife to Reese's throat with the right.

Blake once stood where they were standing. There were no handholds. From experience, Blake knew what it took to keep your balance, and how easy it was to fall.

One thing was clear to Blake – if Reese fell, Mayes was going down right along with him. Based on that, a plan for the worst case scenario was already half formed in his mind, but it all hinged on Reese. Blake looked at him, willing him to understand what he was thinking no matter how crazy it was.

Blake didn't dare do anything yet, but he had a bone chilling feeling that he didn't have much time. The look in Mayes eyes was unfocused, and a smile was spreading across his face. Was he on something?

As Blake was trying to figure him out, Mayes moved the knife to the left like he was preparing to draw a line across Reese's throat from ear to ear. Blake moved faster than he could think. A burst of adrenaline sent him into action before he even made that decision. In his mind, he begged Reese to hold on.

Reese moved at the same time. He didn't struggle. He grabbed Mayes arm to stop the knife and then he let himself fall taking Mayes down with him. With his leg tangled with Reese's, Mayes couldn't keep his balance. They both hit the walkway then rolled off.

The fall was terrifying. Blake threw himself flat on the walkway and reached down. In a state of panic, he grabbed something. It was Reese's jacket. Without letting go, he reached for Reese's wrist with his other hand. He was afraid he might fall but he didn't care. He wasn't going to let go of Reese. That's when he felt Finn grab his legs.

"This walkway better hold," Finn said.

Reese was bleeding from a cut in his left arm, but he held on to the metal bar with his right hand. Beyond him, Blake could see a lot of blood on the ground below and Mayes lying in the middle of it.

With Finn's help, Blake pulled Reese to safety. Finn got off the walkway as soon as he could while Blake held onto Reese.

Carefully, he helped him stay steady as they got off the metal bridge. It moved and creaked under their weight.

Even as Finn and Dee Dee were crowding them, Blake checked Reese for more cuts. Then Reese couldn't seem to help himself. He turned his head. His eyes searched for where Mayes had fallen. As Reese looked down, he started to shiver. It wasn't fear. It was horror. Blake tried to make him turn away, but he couldn't so he just pulled him close and held him.

Dee Dee told them that she called 911.

"Thank you, both of you," Blake said looking at her and Finn with worry. Were they really OK?

"Don't thank us," Dee Dee objected. "Reese gave himself up to that maniac to save me."

"He was holding Dee so he could get his hands on Reese," Finn explained.

Blake stared at her with horror. She looked a little disheveled but not hurt. He could tell that she was shaken up though. Finn was too.

"Thank you," Blake managed to say to Reese as his throat constricted around every word.

"Yes, thank you. That was something," Finn said. He sounded overcome too.

All the gratitude made Reese uncomfortable. "Cut it out, all of you. I brought this problem here."

"Shut up. It wasn't your fault," Finn told him.

"You two almost died," Dee Dee said, pointing back at the walkway.

"That was a crazy stunt," Finn agreed.

"I have prior experience falling off that bridge. That time I just managed to catch myself on that support bar that runs underneath by sheer luck. I didn't even know it was there then. Doing it again wasn't as hard as the first time," Reese said, smiling at the twins wanly.

"You could have ended up like him," Dee Dee said. She only glanced toward where Mayes had fallen then averted her eyes.

Blake could see why she was so freaked out by what they had done. It must have looked insane to rush in like that. It was insane. And the only reason it worked out was because Reese reacted so

fast.

Blake tried to explain himself though he wasn't sure he could.

"We had to risk it. Mayes was ready to..." Blake didn't finish. They all knew what Mayes was ready to do. "Doug Neumar is dead. He was found with his throat slit after talking to Mayes," Blake said to Reese.

"Fuck," Reese said.

"I think Doug must have told Mayes about this place, that we used to hang out here," Blake guessed.

Reese nodded. "Mayes said he knew stuff about me. Maybe he thought I was hiding out here. I did think about it, but I didn't like that there was only one way down."

"Two," Finn said while eyeing where Mayes had fallen. Everyone glared at him. "He was going to cut Dee. Don't expect me to feel sorry for him," he said, looking furious.

"Settle down," Dee Dee told him and hugged him. She turned to Blake and Reese to ask, "So this Mayes guy never planned to get away? He was suicidal?"

Blake shook his head. He couldn't say.

"It's possible that he was," Reese said. "He lived a normal life before he attacked me and got sent to prison. It wrecked his life. My dad had a record, and it's not easy finding even menial work. But Mayes was white collar, worked for some corporation, and he was convicted of sexual assault. Even finding a place to live would be hard. If he couldn't adjust to his new status as a convicted sex offender..."

Sirens and emergency lights interrupted their gloomy, tense mood. An ordeal of a million questions followed. At least Reese's arm was bandaged.

The questioning continued at the police station. That's where Yu Lin met them. She rushed at the twins, hugging them tightly.

"You are supposed to he in school," Yu Lin said.

"Sorry, Mom. I impersonated you and called us in sick," Dee Dee confessed.

"Sorry," Finn said.

"Never mind that," Yu Lin said looking both scared and relieved. "What happened?"

The twins told her the story in overlapping chatter. Hearing that Mayes held Dee Dee hostage, Yu Lin was distraught.

"I'm OK. Good as new, thanks to Reese," Dee Dee said bravely. It was clear how much she wanted to reassure her mom.

Yu Lin looked like she was going to cry. Seeing her like that, Blake was overwhelmed with guilt.

"I'm sorry for all of this," Blake started to say, but all of a sudden, she hugged him.

"I'm glad you're all right, both of you." She looked at both him and Reese. Seeing Blake's surprise, she told him, "I know how they are. Finn and Dee Dee latch on, and they don't let go."

"Yeah. They're pretty great, just like their mom," Blake told her. He couldn't believe she didn't blame him.

"And if you need a lawyer. I can hire one," she offered.

Blake looked over at Reese.

"We aren't under arrest," Reese said.

"I think we're OK," Blake told her. In case the police had any ideas about charging him or Reese, Blake told them that Mayes probably killed Doug Neumar.

"If anything changes, I'll have a lawyer here for you," she assured them.

As she went back to fussing over Finn and Dee Dee, Blake turned to Reese and hugged him. Careful of his arm, he held on to him. Every moment he felt as if the terror of watching him fall was catching up with him. It was hitting him all of a sudden – all the things that could have gone wrong, how close he came to losing Reese. He needed the physical reassurance that Reese was really all right.

Chapter 23

After the police were done with all of them, Yu Lin and the twins wanted Blake and Reese to come home with them. They insisted, but the two of them needed to be alone.

It was nighttime by the time they arrived at the motel and started to climb the stairs up to their room. At the top of the stairs, Reese grabbed the railing. He was starting to shake. It was like he was seeing Mayes dead on the ground all over again. Blake took him in his arms and held him in a tight embrace.

"Tell me what you need," Blake whispered.

"I don't know," Reese said in a voice that was barely louder than a breath. Blake looked at him and saw he was far away.

"Then I'll just keep holding you," Blake told him.

"You. I need you," Reese said suddenly, as if he just remembered. Pulling back, he looked at Blake with bright eyes, not lost and glassy like before.

"You have me," Blake told him.

Reese wrapped him in a hug that tightened until it hurt.

They went inside the motel room, still the same, Blake's grubby heaven on earth. He smiled at the messy bed where he and Reese would sleep again. It made him happy. Their bed, the first one they shared but not the last.

Blake helped Reese take off his clothes and take a shower. He did a good job keeping his bandage dry despite being distracted by the sight of Reese's body under a stream of water. He dried him off too. He was aroused out of his mind, but he kept things fairly decent. The whole time Reese smirked at him and his show of willpower.

At the end of it, Blake had to indulge himself a little. He slipped his arms around Reese from behind, needing to feel him like he needed to breathe. Slowly, Reese turned in his arms with his eyes closed. Blake kissed him lightly until his eyes opened.

Looking into them, Blake felt so lost. They were a deep blue and unbearably sad. Blake kissed him again. He wanted to show him what was possible. He wanted Reese to feel how happy they could

be. Reese just had to let go of his past and give himself to Blake the way he once wanted to.

As he held Reese, Blake was aware that he was holding his dream. It was turning into reality because Reese had a generous heart and loved him more than he deserved. For that, Blake was determined to show him how much he was loved in return.

As he embraced him tightly but tenderly, Blake watched the look in Reese's eyes change. The melancholy was replaced by a fierce, angry expression. His eyes were blindly searching for something until they focused on Blake.

Frenzied with need, Reese was ripping at his clothes, clawing at him and dragging him to the floor. Reese was suddenly wild, like being put in danger and narrowly escaping death only now caught up to him.

Blake wasn't going to try and stop him. Hell he couldn't even slow him down. He simply accepted the weight of his naked body on top of him and the fury in his eyes. As Reese leaned over him and glared, he tried to catch his breath. His mouth moved, but at first no sound came out.

When Reese finally spoke, his voice was raw and hushed. "As bad as it was, today was nothing. What you put me through, that was real hell."

"I'm sorry." Blake was horrified by what Reese was saying.

Reese leaned down even closer to him and stared hard into his eyes. "Now promise you're going to spend the rest of your life making it up to me," he demanded in a gruff voice.

"Yes. I will," Blake gasped, feeling the truth of that promise down to his bones.

At those words, Reese's eyes turned liquid and his voice became less growling and more deep with emotion. "Good. You hurt me, but you healed me too. You were always my drug, my salvation. I wouldn't have been able to live if I didn't have a small hope that somehow one day I would have you," Reese said with the earnestness of a crazy man.

"I'm just a screw-up who loves you," Blake told him simply.

"As long as you are all mine, it's all I need."

Blake confirmed it. "I am. I always will be," he vowed.

With a hand around the back of his neck, Reese brought Blake up and crashed his mouth hard against his. The searing, ravenous kiss sealed the promise between them like a brand. Blake moaned around Reese's tongue thrusting deep into his mouth.

Abruptly, Reese broke off the kiss to get condoms and lube. He kneeled next to Blake and kissed him again. Grabbing Blake's hand, he lubed his fingers and guided them to his ass. Using his mouth, he put the condom on Blake's cock. Then he thrust back impatiently as Blake fingered him, slicked up, and stretched his ass.

Slapping his hand away, Reese straddled him again. Blake gasped feeling his rock hard cock nestled against the curve of Reese's ass. Angling his body, gripping the base of his cock, Reese took Blake inside him. His body sheathed Blake as he let himself drop lower, inch by inch until he was flush against him.

Supporting himself on his good arm, Reese leaned back, breathing hard with Blake deep inside him. Blake panted and moaned, savoring the wonderful feeling of tightness and heat. The sensation of being buried inside Reese was all-consuming. Reese was his world.

"Promise you'll be careful with your arm," Blake managed to say.

"Are you making demands?" Reese asked, leaning forward and bouncing slightly on Blake's cock.

"No. Be careful with your arm," Blake ordered him anyway.

Reese rose above Blake until Blake's cock was almost free of him. Then he lowered himself to let Blake's cock plunge deep again. Blake's hips thrust up on their own. Reese pushed him down. He repeated the slow rise and fall as Blake groaned under him. Blake groped his thighs, feeling the sleek muscles lift Reese off his cock. Descending again, Reese took him into that tight furnace of his body to burn him alive.

Reese didn't stay with the slow but intense strategy. After a while, Reese picked up speed and rode him like a madman. He was driven by a primitive craving. Blake felt it too. It was the need rooted deep in the body to show it was alive, prove its survival. A fuck was the ultimate proof of life. But no matter how rough and driven with animal need, everything they did was filled with love not just desire.

That's why Blake had to stop him. He grabbed hold of Reese's hips

and stilled him.

"Fuck you, Blake. Let go," Reese said, struggling against him.

Blake flipped them over and pinned Reese to the floor.

"I came too close to losing you. That can't ever happen," Blake told him as Reese thrashed under him.

He quieted but kept breathing hard. "Then you better keep me close and satisfy me."

"I plan to." Blake got his legs out of the way and plunged back inside Reese.

Reese wrapped himself around Blake, his arms and legs holding him close. It felt good to be held against his body so tightly, to know he was wanted and needed. As Blake pulled back and thrust in again, pleasure radiated through every inch of him.

"I love you," he told Reese.

Reese laughed and groaned and told Blake to fuck him. But the smile lingered on his lips as his body shook with the heavy pounding Blake was giving him. Blake wondered at him. If the words I love you could make him smile like that, Blake would say them a million times. Every time Blake's cock reached inside the sweet depths of his body, he would say I love you. He would live those words for the rest of his life.

*

Blake was a dream Reese clung to through all the nightmares. Now inside him, he was a wave of pure, unending pleasure that drove Reese out of his mind. As crazy as he felt before when he pushed Blake down to the floor, it was nothing compared to this.

As it moved inside him, Blake's cock obliterated every sane thought in his head. Every inch of him ached for Blake. His hands were cruel, raking Blake's skin, squeezing his ass in a hard grip. It was as if he had forgotten that Blake was human and could feel, that Blake loved him. But Reese needed him so desperately, he couldn't think. He wanted too much – control and possession, to own Blake, to take him inside himself and never let him go.

His whole being vibrated with need for Blake. Damn, he had so much power over him. No drug could ever get its hooks into Reese

like this. He spent his whole life freefalling into Blake's arms, just on the off chance that Blake might open his arms and catch him. Now it was happening. Blake was his, and Reese had to have him over and over again.

After narrowly escaping death, his need was like an animal's, base and pure, too primal to resist. Reese unleashed it. He let it howl and drag Blake down with him to that uncivilized place where bodies thrashed and pounded. Blake's cock surged inside him, hot steel that split him opened and filled him up.

He lost himself to the relentless rhythm of Blake's cock pumping in and out of him. Nothing existed but their two bodies, slick with sweat, needing each other. Rough breaths and desperate moans mingling until Reese didn't know his own voice from Blake's, his own body from the one above him, his own need from Blake's.

He needed Blake to come. He begged for it. He drove his body hard into Blake's to make it happen. He wanted to hear Blake's loud moan melt through him, to feel his ecstasy shake his bones and make him shoot his own blissful release over both of them.

Teeth gritted against a scream of agonizing pleasure, Reese arched, a bow pulled tight, ready to shoot. Then came the release. His come streamed over both of them. His insides throbbed and pulsed, closing around Blake. As Blake roared, Reese squeezed him, his whole body a tight fist around Blake's cock, forcing him to come.

Blake was falling with him into the pure pleasure that swallowed Reese whole. Blake's hard muscles quivered as he punched one last time deep inside him then collapsed into his arms. Murmuring, "I love you, Reese," Blake kissed him all over. Reese dragged himself out from under him as Blake's hands slid along his slick flesh to try and hold him. Stumbling, he got up and pulled Blake off the floor too.

After wiping himself off, Reese dropped to the bed and stretched out. He held out his arms, beckoning Blake to climb into bed with him. When Blake kneeled on the bed, Reese pulled him down on top of him. It wasn't long before Blake closed his eyes, falling asleep, leaving Reese to stare at the ceiling, feeling satisfied and happy.

Reese woke to Blake shifting on top of him, trying to snuggle

closer. Feeling his weight settle on top of him, Reese pushed him off roughly.

"I'm not a mattress," he told Blake, who looked at him groggily.

Reese pulled free of him though his cock demanded attention. Both their cocks did, but Reese was still shivering with the memory of the night before. He needed to feel sane for a little while and that wasn't possible if he let Blake manhandle him again.

Reese was about to get into the shower when he stopped in the doorway to the bathroom. A realization hit him. He slept the whole night through. No nightmares. Reese smiled to himself. Even though he knew the nightmares weren't done with him, he kept smiling. That's when Blake came up behind him and tried to maul him. That should teach him not to linger around that insatiable beast.

"I'm taking a shower," Reese told him and shoved him away.

"You need me to keep the bandage dry," Blake said.

He was so transparent, even if his hard cock wasn't a dead giveaway about his real motive.

"I'll manage," Reese told him and shut the door in his face. He had no intention of indulging Blake every second even if his cock did ache for Blake's hand, his mouth, or any part of him. Reese's own hand did the job, kind of. Using his hand to jerk off reminded him of its state.

Once he got out of the shower, he looked down at his right hand. His fingers hurt like hell. This was the hand that saved him. It got bruised by the impact with the metal bar he grabbed to keep himself from falling. Under the bandage, the cut hurt every time he moved his left arm. Reese thought back to that moment when Blake signaled him with just a look. If they had not been so perfectly in sync, he would be dead now.

When he was done in the bathroom, Blake checked his bandage.

"What we did was crazy," Blake declared while looking at his arm.

"No way was I going to die when I just found you again," Reese told him.

He smiled, but Blake looked pale. His breathing was shallow, his hand cold as Reese took it in his own. He slumped against Reese with his forehead on his shoulder. Reese kissed his face and his neck. He felt the stubble against his lips as he fitted his body against

Blake's.

"Hold me tighter," he told Blake though he was the one who was shaky. He knew it would make Blake feel better.

"I don't want to crush you. The way I feel right now, I think I might," Blake said as his strong arms squeezed Reese but not as hard as they could.

Reese looked at him. "Crush me," he said with a smile as he sank against Blake and let the man he loved hold him as tight as he wanted.

Chapter 24

Though Finn and Dee were perfectly fine, their mom decided to keep them home the next day. Finn wanted to sleep late, if only Dee would let him. Barging into Finn's room, sitting on his bed, Dee nudged him awake. Like he could sleep with her practically sitting on his arm.

"What happened is all over the school. I have like a million texts," Dee said, showing him her phone.

Finn groaned as he looked at the blinking light on the phone sitting on his nightstand. He was about to pick it up when he heard the doorbell. After a minute, Mom called him to the door.

Throwing on some clothes, Finn went to the hall and stopped. Nando was standing by the front door. Finn felt like he should rub his eyes to make sure he wasn't still asleep.

He might be dreaming because Nando didn't seem like his usual self. He looked stricken, both helpless and wound up, like he was ready to fall apart if Finn didn't do or say something. Finn had never seen him like that.

Coming over to him on shaky legs, Nando peered at him intently. Finn could swear he was holding his breath. He looked Finn over as if he needed to make sure he was still in one piece. It made Finn wonder what kind of rumors were going around town.

"I'm fine, if that's what you're asking," Finn said though Nando hadn't asked or said anything. Suddenly Nando pulled him into a bruising, bone snapping hug.

"You live dangerously," Nando told him, holding him too tight and breathing hard against him. Then he kissed him.

It was such a shock of pure, hot pleasure that Finn was almost knocked over. As the kiss ended, all he could do was stare at Nando.

"Now that you got me going, you're living dangerously too," Finn said to him, tasting the kiss and feeling its heat spreading all through him.

"I guess so. Can't let you out of my sight." He looked annoyed with Finn, but his eyes were smiling and a little teary. Overcome with emotion, he was so hot. It was no wonder Finn didn't notice who else

was standing there.

After a few minutes passed with Nando nuzzling his neck and calling his name passionately, Finn finally noticed Andrew waiting in the corner like a little mouse.

Nando turned to look too. "Oh, yeah. I gave him a ride," he said like he had only just remembered that Andrew was there. "I don't know how he knew where I was going. I was at school when I heard about what happened. I got into my car, and he sneaked in before I even knew he was there. Then he wouldn't get out until I drove him to your house."

"A man after my own heart," Finn said with approval.

"Him?" Nando squinted at Andrew jealously.

"How did you know where he was going? Did Dee tell you about us?" Finn asked Andrew since he didn't look surprised to see them making out.

"She didn't need to. Everyone knows," Andrew said. "They just don't say anything because they're afraid of Nando."

"But you aren't. Good for you," Finn said to Andrew. Then he turned to Nando and shook his head. "And you, wasting my time with all that sneaking around."

"There's no way everyone knows," Nando insisted through gritted teeth. He was so stubborn and oblivious.

"Dee! There's one here for you too!" Finn yelled, and Nando flinched at the volume.

As Dee came out into the hall, Andrew looked so tearful on seeing her. He was an even bigger mess than Nando as he sniffed pitifully and stared at her.

"But I texted you that I was OK," Dee said on seeing his face and the way he blinked back tears behind his slightly fogged up glasses.

"I had to see you with my own eyes," Andrew said in a shaky voice.

Dee went over and hugged him. Seeing them all over each other, somehow, Finn still didn't want to kick his ass.

"I must love that boy," he said.

Of course Nando took it the wrong way. "You need to stop saying crap like that," he growled.

Finn grinned at him. He was just making it too easy for Finn to

drive him crazy.

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While the investigation was conducted, Blake and Reese couldn't leave town until the police told them it was OK. Blake didn't really mind staying in Meadowview a little longer. He spent more time with Finn and Dee Dee and got to watch them with their boyfriends.

Andrew was adorable and he doted on Dee Dee. Nando was another story. He glared at Blake constantly, and Finn never stopped stoking his temper. Still, Blake got to see Nando out in public with Finn, being good to him. The way his eyes were always searching for Finn, gazing at him with tenderness and fire, there was no doubt Nando was crazy about him.

Once the police said they could leave town, Blake got ready to try saying goodbye to the twins for the third time. He knew by now that it wouldn't stick. There was no getting rid of them. He and Reese were ready to go, and the twins came over to see them off.

"But now we're used to having you around. You can't go," Dee Dee whined.

Blake kissed the top of her head. "I need to go back to college and my job. I have just this year, and I'll be finished with school," he told her.

"And I'm going to go be his boytoy," Reese said.

"How can we argue when you put it like that?" Finn said to Reese.

Dee Dee was still pouting though. Blake put his arm around her. "We'll text and Skype, and you can tell me all the bad stuff Finn is doing."

"I promise to give you plenty to bitch about," Finn assured her.

"I'm not just going to bitch about you the whole time. I'm an interesting person in my own right," Dee Dee snapped at him.

"And you," Finn said to Blake. "Keep your promise. Don’t make me put a tracking collar on you."

Blake grabbed both of them for a three way hug. Then they were off.

As he and Reese got in the car, Dee Dee yelled, "Just remember,

keep in touch, or we'll hunt you down like animals."

Reese laughed and Blake told him, "Let's go before they slash my tires or put a banana in my tail pipe or something."

They drove away with Finn and Dee Dee waving the whole time.

On the road, Blake felt like between them, he and Reese owned the world. Fields stretched out for them. The sun shone down for them alone. He knew that was just love making everything beautiful. This was how it should have been all along.

Love could have brought them together if Blake didn't let fear and denial get in the way. Having been at the mercy of the wrong feelings for too long, he was happy to finally give in to the one that should have guided him all along. He looked over at Reese and grinned like a fool, a damn lucky fool.

After they drove for a little while, Blake said, "First thing we do when we get there – we watch the sunset over the ocean. The first time I saw it I couldn't catch my breath."

"You love a pretty sunset that much?" Reese asked and gave Blake a disapproving stare.

"No. I couldn't stop thinking that I might be on the other side of the country from you. That for you, the sun might be rising over the ocean. I didn't know where you were, and my heart hurt so much, I thought it might just stop beating. That's why I want to see it with you. I want to see the sunset and turn around and see you next to me so you can tell me sunsets are cheesy."

"Sunsets are cheesy," Reese confirmed. "Sunsets on the beach are extra cheesy."

"Save it. We aren't there yet," Blake grumbled. The romantic moment he was planning was already shot to hell.

Reese was still shaking his head at him. "Next thing you'll be telling me that you want us to get married on the beach. I'm not marrying you on any cheesy beach in front of some cheesy sunset."

"Marrying?" Reese said, grinning stupidly at the idea.

"Yeah. What did you think? I didn't hunt you down to let you roam free." Reese eyed him possessively.

"I hunted you down," Blake insisted. Then he said, "And I want to marry you too."

"Just drive," Reese said then he leaned over and kissed him. Snuggling against him, he carefully fitted himself around Blake as he kept the car moving more or less in a straight line.

Blake didn't care about sunsets any more. All he wanted was this feeling – Reese so close that they breathed as one. When Reese blinked, Blake could feel hiss eyelashes brush his skin. And when he hummed with the music, it carried through his body to Blake's and mixed with the beating of their hearts.

The End

Books by Trina Solet

Where He Belongs

Jack thought he had everything only to end up without a wife, a best friend or a child. Now he is closed off and afraid to love. After despair nearly cost him his life, he can't afford another heartbreak. Burying himself in work, Jack has made business his whole life. Now a business opportunity has led him to Gus, the one man who can break down his defenses.

Gus doesn't know what he is getting himself into when he flirts with his new boss. The uptight younger man is irresistible to him. Is Gus being reckless when he falls for Jack despite all the warning signs? After all, Gus is a happy, single father to a little boy, and Josh is a happy kid.

As he is drawn into their lives, Jack finds that Gus and his little boy are everything he needs and what he is most afraid of. Jack can't risk his heart again, but he might be won over by these two goofballs despite himself.

His True Home

Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's

where all three of them belong.

Long Lost

Blake Adler is back in town on a mission. Years ago Blake's father cut him out of his life so completely that he never spoke of him. Now that his father has passed away, Blake finally gets to meet his younger brother and sister. But Blake didn't come back to Meadowview for a reunion with his lost family. He's desperate to find the man he can't live without and win back the love he threw away.

Blake and Reese were once best friends. They could have been more, but Blake screwed up the most important relationship of his life. Now he wants to fix things with Reese, if he can only find him.

Blake isn't the only one looking for Reese. No matter how far Reese runs, trouble follows him. Wild and vulnerable, he always had it rough. The one good thing in his life was Blake.

Now Reese is taking a big risk coming back to town. It might be worth it if he can reclaim the man he can't stop thinking about, the one who rejected him, the one he loves more than anyone.

Manny To The Rescue

Why would Owen be terrified of Connie and Maggie, his two adorable little nieces? Because he is about to be left alone with them. Owen thinks he is going to have to take care of his nieces by himself until Dan shows up. If Owen approves, Dan is ready to be the girls' manny. Right from the start, Dan is a big help and an even bigger temptation. And Owen isn't the only one being tempted. When he was younger, Dan had a crush on Owen. Now that he is living with him, Owen has never looked hotter. The crush is back in full force. Too bad Dan isn't the kind of guy Owen is into. But even a hint that he is interested might spur Dan to make a move. Unfortunately, Dan is bringing trouble with him, and he doesn't even know it. When Owen becomes a target, will Dan be there in time to save him?

His Winter Heart

Wes is living a lonely, stark existence when he meets Colin, a lively young guy in desperate circumstances. Wes is so taken with him that he has to have him. His decision to invite Colin to spend the night is going to turn his quiet life upside down.

Colin almost finds himself sleeping on the street. When the tall,

blond man makes him an offer, he can't say no either to the money or to the man. Colin is impulsive and full of contradictions. He refuses to sell himself for money and ends up homeless because of it. But when Wes offers to pay him for sex, Colin jumps at the chance to go home with him. Something about Wes strikes a chord with Colin. He knows there is a warm heart under the serious, impassive exterior and an awesome body under all the layers of winter clothes.

Things don't go as planned when Wes decides that Colin is too young and inexperienced and refuses to sleep with him. That doesn't mean that he can stay away from someone who shakes up his world.

The more time Colin spends with Wes, the more he wants him. Colin isn't shy about getting what he wants. His relentless pursuit might pay off if Wes doesn't let family complications and his fears about the future keep them apart. Will Wes let go of his inhibitions and allow himself to love the younger man?

Poison Heart

Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

And Manny Makes Three

Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don’t need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

Unexpected Dad

Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn’t know he had a daughter until she suddenly dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not,

little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.

More Than a Manny

A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot manny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

Duncan the Third

Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?

Make It Better

A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can't overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to save him?

My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story

For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.

The Right Guy

They came together in paradise, but what will happen when they go back to the real world and their everyday lives?

Nathan and Paul never liked each other. Paul was a snob, and Nathan felt like he was always looking down on him. Nathan wasn't interested in him anyway. He had his sights set on Turner. Now that Turner is getting married to another man, Nathan's heart is breaking. That's when he finds that Paul is right there by his side. This gorgeous man is ready to distract him and help him get over his unrequited crush.

After being with Paul, Nathan is finally ready to move on and let go of his hopeless feelings. But after a hot encounter on the beach, Nathan might be giving up his old crush for a new one. Knowing that his longing for Paul is just as hopeless, Nathan is at his wit's end.

But things aren't the way they seem. Paul has been watching Nathan pine after his friend for too long. All that time he has wanted Nathan all to himself. It's hard for Paul to believe that Nathan could ever return his feelings. After all, Nathan doesn't even like him.

He doesn't know that Nathan feels differently about him these days. When spending time with Paul stirs unexpected feelings that are more than lust, Nathan wonders if he misjudged this man. Could Paul be the right man for him? After chasing the wrong guy for so long, Nathan has to prove to Paul that his feelings are real. That won't be easy. Paul isn't the most reasonable guy, and he won't settle for anything less from Nathan than his whole heart.